



Identity Theft

Notifications



**ORGANISED
CRIME**
TASK FORCE

ANNUAL REPORT

& THREAT
ASSESSMENT

2023/24



ANNUAL REPORT & THREAT ASSESSMENT 2023/24

JULY 2025

FOREWORD

BY JUSTICE MINISTER NAOMI LONG MLA

As Justice Minister, I am pleased to publish this 2023/24 Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) report, which sets out the collective success of OCTF partners in tackling organised crime, alongside the threat assessment and response in relation to key organised crime types.

Overall, it has been another challenging year for Northern Ireland as we face significant financial challenges and constrained budgets. However, this has not detracted from my aim to make Northern Ireland a safer place with less crime and fewer victims.

The work to disrupt Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) and bring them to justice is complex and challenging. I am grateful to all the agencies involved in delivering another excellent year of results, and for their continued relentless efforts to tackle organised criminality and seize the proceeds of crime.

As the environment changes, policing and law enforcement agencies continue to evolve and embrace new technologies and adapt to existing as well as emerging threats. I want to commend the excellent work which has been carried out by partners and I continue to be impressed by their dedication, commitment and persistence in pursuing those criminals who set out to exploit, threaten and spread misery and fear across communities, including many individuals who are vulnerable.

The report provides an update on the outcomes achieved in 2023/24 and demonstrates progress across a range of themes to reduce the harm caused by organised crime. One of the most significant areas of concern highlighted by the threat assessment is the emergence of new synthetic opioids, which are often combined with other illicit drugs, meaning that chemical compositions and the effects of them are very unpredictable. Another worrying development is the number of young people using illicit vapes – many of which also contain these dangerous synthetic drugs.



By pedalling these unsafe substances OCGs show no regard for the harm they are causing to individuals and communities; they are only interested in lining their own pockets. It is assessed that almost 75% of OCGs are involved in the supply of drugs so I am delighted to note that, during the period of this report, police alone seized drugs with an estimated street value of almost £21 million, with Border Force and the National Crime Agency also involved in significant seizures of drugs including cocaine and cannabis. Law enforcement agencies continue to work tirelessly to target these groups – to take drugs off the streets and bring the culprits to justice.

In addition to disruption activities, the ongoing recovery of criminal assets has enabled the allocation of funding through the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS), which supports initiatives aimed at preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime across local communities. The last ARCS, which ran for 18 months and finished March 2024, saw almost £1 million being allocated to community-based projects. In April 2024 I was delighted to announce that, following assessment of more than 180 applications, my department has awarded 43 projects funding totalling between £400k and £500k in each of the next three years, beginning in April 2024.

We need to continue to embed a culture of lawfulness and to challenge any perceived legitimacy around those who are involved in these activities and actively participating in organised crime. I want to send a strong message to criminals that the harm they cause to individuals and communities within Northern Ireland will not be tolerated. I am progressing new legislation which will provide law enforcement agencies with additional capabilities to target all those engaged in organised crime at any level.

The work of the OCTF, as highlighted throughout this report, continues to show how critical it is that we maximise the collective efforts of all partners to target and disrupt organised criminality. We must not become complacent. Alongside recognising the excellent work of our law enforcement agencies, it is also important to remember the part we can all play to help combat organised criminal activity by reporting any suspected criminality to help bring those responsible to justice.



NAOMI LONG MLA
MINISTER OF JUSTICE

EVERYBODY'S HELP IS NEEDED TO COMBAT ORGANISED CRIME...

DON'T SUPPORT IT. REPORT IT!

TELEPHONE NUMBERS

PSNI

101

ACTION FRAUD

0300 123 2040

HMRC HOTLINE

0800 788 887

CONSUMERLINE

0300 123 6262

ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

0800 807 060

MODERN SLAVERY HELPLINE

0800 0121 700

BENEFIT FRAUD HOTLINE

0800 975 6050

CRIMESTOPPERS

0800 555 111

***CrimeStoppers Northern Ireland is an independent charity that takes information about crime 100% anonymously via a freephone number or by completing a secure anonymous online form.**

Professional and trained contact centre staff are available 24/7, 365 days a year.

Every day concerned members of the public pass on what they know about crime – providing valuable information that otherwise might never reach law enforcement were it not for the charity's cast-iron guarantee of anonymity.

That promise has been kept since the charity began over 35 years ago.



**ORGANISED
CRIME**
TASK FORCE

The **OCTF Website** provides information on the structure and purpose of the Task Force. It is a source of up-to-date information, guidance and support to the public throughout the year on how to identify, report and protect individuals and businesses from organised crime. Take a closer look at **www.octf.gov.uk**

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**ORGANISED
CRIME**
TASK FORCE

INTRODUCTION AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT

ORGANISED CRIME

Organised crime can be defined as planned and coordinated criminal behaviour, conducted by people, groups or networks working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is usually financial gain. Organised crime operates within and across jurisdictions and causes harm to individuals, communities and businesses. Organised crime may involve violence or the threat of violence and, in Northern Ireland, some organised crime groups also have paramilitary connections. Criminality does not operate in a vacuum; criminals often bribe, coerce or prey on others to support their criminal enterprises, which can include the assistance of complicit or negligent professionals. It takes many forms including drug trafficking, modern slavery/human trafficking, cyber-crime, counterfeiting, fuel laundering, waste

crime, tobacco and alcohol smuggling, fraud or money laundering and acquisitive crime

Driven primarily by greed, with no regard for the rights, safety and welfare of citizens, organised crime is never a victimless crime and it often affects more than just the direct victim. At a societal level, the corrosive impact that organised criminality, such as drug dealing, can have on local communities is clear. Local commerce can suffer as organised criminals operating outside the law offer lower prices that legitimate businesses cannot compete with. Organised criminality also diverts money away from investment in key public services, while the proceeds of crime are used to fund further criminality and lavish lifestyles at the expense of victims.

ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

OCGs continue to cause harm to communities in Northern Ireland; they operate without any respect for the law, driven by an ethos of greed. They supply illicit, 'underground', markets, without any concern about the harm caused. They exist to make profits, usually predominantly for senior members who are often not 'hands on'. These high level OCG members direct and manipulate other members in order to maximise financial gain for themselves. They do not care about the personal and community harm caused by the activities they are directing and are often not averse to manipulating vulnerable people as they simultaneously destroy local communities.

OCGs are not necessarily restricted to one type of criminality; for example, an OCG may start by importing counterfeit goods and then diversify into importing other goods such as controlled drugs. OCGs evolve, taking advantage of changes in the market and the availability of new technologies and methodologies. The development of prevention and detection methodologies by law enforcement agencies also leads to OCGs changing their Modus Operandi (MO).

As of March 2024, PSNI was investigating 61 organised crime groups (OCGs) assessed to be operating in Northern Ireland. These groups work alongside others within Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Republic of Ireland, other parts of Europe and sometimes further afield.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

In April 2023, The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) implemented the Agency and Partner Management Information System (APMIS) platform, which enables cross-partner access to input and share performance data and analysis of prioritisation assessments based on the Management of Risk in Law Enforcement (MoRiLE) methodology. MoRiLE is a risk assessment tool which uses a standardised approach and common language in respect of harm, threat and risk, to allow strategic and tactical issues to be assessed in a consistent manner. The PSNI are still in the process of transferring all relevant data over to APMIS in a phased approach and as such numbers and data may be changeable until this process is complete.

The adoption of APMIS will enable a consistent approach to understanding SOC demand across all

law enforcement partners in Northern Ireland and the common prioritisation of risk. It is anticipated that this will support tasking and co-ordination between all law enforcement agencies and assist in the collective fight against SOC and the disruption of high-harm criminals and Organised Crime Groups.

PSNI currently assesses and records disruptions against Organised Crime Groups (and individuals involved in organised crime) using APMIS. A disruption is a measurement of impact and it may be achieved by any activity that will have involved some form of intentional intervention, resulting in an output impacting upon the threat. Levels of impact are recorded as: Minor, Moderate and Major. Disruptions are also assessed against the Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare framework, often referred to as the 4Ps.

THE ORGANISED CRIME TASK FORCE (OCTF)

The OCTF is a voluntary, multi-agency partnership, which seeks to support law-abiding citizens and enable the legitimate business community to flourish by identifying and mitigating the effects of organised crime. Established in Northern Ireland in 2000, the Task Force provides strategic leadership and supports a collaborative, joined-up response to the threat posed by organised crime through multi-agency partnership working. OCTF partners work together to identify and assess any new and emerging crime types and keep these under review as well as monitoring the groups and networks active in Northern Ireland and further afield.

The OCTF provides a forum in which expertise and information can be shared. It supports the development of operational partnerships and plays an important role in informing the public about how to protect themselves from, and report any suspicions of, organised crime.

The OCTF Strategy Group membership includes senior representation from statutory agencies and law enforcement partners to provide oversight across a number of thematic Sub Groups and oversee the delivery of strategic actions in the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Strategy 2021-2024.

The OCTF Sub Groups focus on a priority assessed area of organised criminality, including drugs, cyber crime, modern slavery and human trafficking, criminal finance and intellectual property crime (including counterfeit goods).

The co-ordination of the OCTF structures is supported by the Department of Justice.

A list of OCTF partner organisations and representatives on the Task Force is attached at **Appendix 1** to this report.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND ORGANISED CRIME STRATEGY 2021-2024

The Northern Ireland Organised Crime Strategy 2021–2024 is a collaborative, multi-agency initiative designed to safeguard individuals, communities, and businesses across Northern Ireland from the threat of organised crime. It was launched on 1 April 2021 and can be accessed online at:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/organised-crime-strategy>

This Strategy is built around four key thematic pillars:

- **Pursue:** Targeting offenders through investigation, disruption, and legal prosecution.
- **Prepare and Protect:** Helping people, communities, organisations, and systems reduce their exposure to harm and increase resilience.
- **Prevent:** Discouraging and redirecting individuals from becoming involved—or re-involved—in organised criminal activity.
- **Partnership:** Fostering a coordinated, sustainable, and collaborative response across agencies.

The Strategy outlines a shared vision and clarifies the responsibilities, priorities, and accountability mechanisms of the organisations involved. This clarity is vital not only for the statutory and law enforcement bodies implementing the Strategy but also for assuring the public of a united effort to combat organised crime in all its forms.

It recognises the importance of coordination with other initiatives, both locally and nationally, and is closely linked with the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC). It also supports the operational efforts of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force.

Oversight of the Strategy's implementation is provided by the OCTF Strategy Group, assisted by various OCTF Sub Groups. One major objective is the introduction of new legislation to create specific criminal offences targeting serious organised crime in Northern Ireland. The Department of Justice is actively developing tailored proposals for such laws. Following a public consultation in 2020, and subject to the legislative process, draft legislation will be presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Legislative efforts are expected to continue into 2024/25 as allowed by the Assembly's schedule.

A further critical aspect of the Strategy is the recovery of criminal assets. Agencies within the OCTF utilise powers under the *Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA)* 2002 to seize assets obtained through illegal means. Recovering these assets not only hinders the ability of organised crime groups to operate but also prevents reinvestment in further criminal activity and tackles money laundering. Confiscating illicit gains is a powerful method for disrupting and dismantling organised criminal networks and those linked to them.

Funds recovered through POCA are often reinvested into initiatives that reduce crime and support communities. The *Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS)* directs resources to community-based crime reduction projects, while the *Assets Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS)* strengthens law enforcement's capacity to pursue and disrupt criminal assets. Chapter 4 provides further detail on how ARCS funds were allocated in 2022/23 and how ARIS supports enforcement activities.

As the current NI Organised Crime Strategy now comes to an end, the department is giving consideration to the next iteration as we seek new and innovative ways to tackle organised crime.

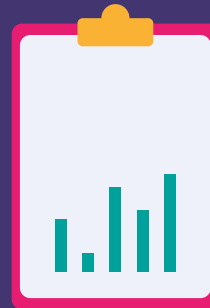


STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1:

Improve our understanding of existing and emerging threats, including the motivation and opportunities for modern slavery and human trafficking.



Regular UK **strategic threat** assessments shared with partners



Regular Strategic Assessments of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:

Ensure we have effective capability, tools and legislation to tackle organised crime affecting Northern Ireland.



Work continued on the development of new Northern Ireland-specific offences to strengthen the law enforcement response to serious organised crime.

OCT 2023

In October 2023 two UK Acts were passed - the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act and the Online Safety Act.



First Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) obtained by the NCA.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3:

Continuous pursuit of those involved in organised crime.



8,472

PSNI drug seizure incidents

3,580

PSNI drug related arrests



16

Account freezing orders (£0.6m)



93

Cash seizures (£1.5m)



11

Confiscation orders granted (£1m)



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4:

Work with individuals, communities and businesses to build resilience against organised crime, and to ensure a system response which is focused on victim safety and wellbeing.

Engage with public at the **Balmoral Show**, promoting public messaging on the **misuse of drugs**, impact of buying **counterfeit goods**, the benefits of good **cyber hygiene** and alerts of **cybercrimes**



496

Potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking were referred to the **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)**

Asset Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) continued to support **63 projects** during the second year of this call.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5:

Effective work to deter and divert people from becoming involved or re-engaging in organised crime.

Support Hubs are operating in all **11 council areas**



Multi-agency support hubs support vulnerable individuals who may require support from more than one agency.



The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism & Organised Crime



The programme has invested £16m to keep people safe, develop community resilience and increase protective factors for people at risk.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 6:

Provide an effective and efficient collaborative response to organised crime affecting Northern Ireland.



Regular OCTF and JAFT Strategic and threat-specific meetings to address organised crime.

Regular strategic engagement and ongoing operational activity with other jurisdictions to tackle serious organised crime (SOC), including Northern Ireland law enforcement agencies participation in a Cross Border SOC Conference, organised by An Garda Síochána.



OP Pangea, a global Interpol coordinated week long operation to disrupt the illicit online supply of medicines. NI's 2023 contribution: 712,000+ illegal, unlicensed products seized, with a street value of almost £785,000.



**ORGANISED
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KEY PARTNERS



CHAPTER 2: KEY PARTNERS

THE KEY OCTF STRATEGIC PARTNERS AND CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS REPORT ARE:



The Department of Justice is responsible for the resourcing, legislative and policy framework of the justice system in Northern Ireland. The Department is the lead department for the Organised Crime Strategy and supports the Organised Crime Task Force Strategy Group and its Sub Groups. The Department helps shape the policy context and leads on necessary legislative changes. The Department also funds the provision of analytical support to the OCTF and administers the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS). Representatives from relevant agencies are represented on the OCTF.



Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for keeping people safe by investigating a range of offences across the crime spectrum. As such, it is a major contributor to the work of the OCTF, including:

- **Cyber Crime** - The PSNI Cyber Crime Centre is a specialist unit to develop capability, capacity and connectivity in respect to the prevention, protection and detection of cyber crime to keep people safe in Northern Ireland.
- **Drugs** - PSNI works closely with partners to target those who import, supply and use drugs. It takes a proactive role to stop drug dealers operating within our communities.
- **Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking** - PSNI has had a dedicated Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) in place since 2015.
- **Economic Crime** - PSNI Economic Crime Unit and Organised Crime Unit work closely to combat money laundering and to prevent organised criminals benefiting from their illegal enterprises.
- **Intellectual Property Crime** - PSNI supports other OCTF partners to remove counterfeit goods from the market; reduce the physical harm they can cause; reduce the impact on legitimate traders; and prevent profit being used to fund other forms of organised crime.



The National Crime Agency (NCA) is the UK's national law enforcement Agency operating in Northern Ireland since May 2015. Its mission is to protect the public by leading the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime (SOC) and its scope extends to crimes committed outside the UK. With the agreement of PSNI, which retains operational primacy in Northern Ireland, designated NCA officers are able to exercise the powers of a Northern Ireland police constable. NCA supports operational partners, including PSNI, to tackle serious and organised crime impacting Northern Ireland and help protect Northern Ireland communities.



HM Revenue & Customs

HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), a non-ministerial department of the UK Government, is the UK's tax, payments and customs authority and has a vital purpose collecting the money that pays for the UK's public services and helps families and individuals with targeted financial support. HMRC helps the honest majority to get their tax right and make it hard for the dishonest minority to cheat the system.

HMRC Fraud Investigation Service (FIS) which has responsibility for civil and criminal investigations into the most serious tax evasion and fraud works closely with partner agencies locally and across international borders to draw upon and share expertise to tackle organised criminality in Northern Ireland.



Border Force

Border Force is a law enforcement command within the Home Office. Border Force secures the UK border and promotes national prosperity by facilitating the legitimate movement of individuals and goods, whilst preventing those that would cause harm from entering the UK. This is achieved through the immigration and customs checks carried out by Border Force staff at ports and airports.



The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is an Executive Agency within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The Agency's primary purpose is to protect and enhance Northern Ireland's environment, and in doing so, deliver health and well-being benefits and support economic growth. The NIEA Enforcement Branch focuses its resources on investigating cases, which present a significant risk to the environment and public health, including waste crime.



Department for

Communities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

The Department for Communities Benefit Security Division – The Organised Fraud Unit (OFU) within the Benefit Security Division investigates any incident of potential organised criminality against the benefits system.



Immigration Enforcement

Immigration Enforcement is a Directorate of the Home Office and is responsible for protecting the public by removing immigration offenders and prosecuting the criminals who facilitate immigration crime. Immigration Enforcement carries out operations against document fraud, sham marriages, rogue employers and illegal workers.



Department for the
Economy
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

The Department for the Economy's **Trading Standards Service (TSS)** delivers consumer protection enforcement in Northern Ireland. TSS delivers a front-line public protection function for the benefit of consumers, businesses and the Northern Ireland economy. That function comprises the twin aims of protecting Northern Ireland consumers - particularly the most vulnerable - from illegal and unfair trading practices and providing support and guidance for Northern Ireland businesses (particularly small businesses) so that they can deal effectively with regulation.



PPS

Independent
Fair
Effective

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) receives investigation files and determines if the Test for Prosecution is met and conducts criminal proceedings where appropriate.



Security Industry Authority

The Security Industry Authority (SIA) is responsible for regulating the private security industry in the United Kingdom. This means the SIA licenses individuals undertaking designated activities within the private security industry and manages the voluntary Approved Contractor Scheme, which measures private security suppliers against independently assessed standards.


The SIA works closely with local and national police forces, local authority licensing partners, other enforcement agencies, security providers, buyers and venue owners to understand, identify and successfully mitigate a broad range of public protection and safeguarding risks. These include terrorism, violence (including against women and girls), drugs and spiking, serious and organised crime, modern slavery, labour exploitation as well as child sexual exploitation and abuse.



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THREAT AND OCTF RESPONSE 2023/24





This chapter highlights the outputs from partner organisations and the outcomes of the strategic approach to tackling criminality in all its forms, assessing how far the work contributes to achieving the objectives of the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Strategy. The earlier summary infographic highlights some of the key achievements during 2023/24.

The information is reported according to crime type. The case studies and operations show the benefit of partnership working between the agencies. While this chapter details the disruptive activities and successful operations, it is important to note that this work will also have positive social, environmental and economic benefits not readily quantifiable.

RESULT HIGHLIGHTS IN 2023/24



496[#]
**POTENTIAL VICTIMS
OF MODERN SLAVERY
RECOVERED**

Number of NRM referrals. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK-wide framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has implemented the Agency and Partner Management Information System (APMIS) platform. This assists easier sharing of performance, analysis and prioritisation assessments between law enforcement agencies, using a standardised approach and common language. The assessment criteria and terminology used in APMIS differs to that used by PSNI in previous years, and data is subject to change during this initial phase of transferring information onto the new system; however, once fully embedded it will provide more consistent and comparable data.

DRUGS SEIZURES AND ARRESTS



8,472

Drug seizures



3,580

Drug-related arrests

PSNI



22

Class A

172

Class B

111

Class C

**BORDER FORCE
SEIZURES**



300kg

Cannabis



132.5kg

Cocaine

**NCA
SEIZURES**

ASSET RECOVERY SUCCESSES BY PSNI



**Confiscation
Orders**

£936,923



**Cash
Forfeitures**

£544,365



**Cash
Seizures**

£1,488,045



**Account Freezing Order
Forfeitures**

£284,375



**Restraint
Orders**

£1,108,000

3.1 CYBER CRIME

THE THREAT

In a reflection of the increasingly ICT (information and communication technology) dependent world, cyber and cyber-dependent crimes are now a key feature of the organised crime landscape in Northern Ireland.

During this reporting period, the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB) recorded 427 cyber crime reports in Northern Ireland, with reported losses of £263,300. This is likely to be a significant under-estimation, and it should also be noted that education in relation to crimes like ransomware attacks has raised awareness, likely resulting in faster reporting and fewer blackmail payments being made. Under-reporting of cyber crime still remains an issue - due to embarrassment, the fear of reputational damage and the fear of retribution (either by the OCG or regulatory bodies). Of the reports made, the majority related to hacking of social media and email accounts.

Cyber-dependent crime

Cyber-dependent crimes cannot be committed without the use of ICT devices. Examples include:

- **Ransomware attacks**, where the victim's device is locked and data/files encrypted. Criminals then demand payment of a ransom in exchange for decryption and access to the files and data. Non-payment of ransom demands can lead to the release of data extracted during the attack. Often released for anyone to download for free, this data can be of a nature that would be of value to criminals involved in other forms of criminality such as fraud. Over recent years, the delivery of ransomware has changed, with specialised groups now offering 'Ransomware as a Service' (RaaS) to low skilled affiliates and 'double extortion', i.e. demanding payment to acquire a decryption key and prevent the release of data taken prior to the attack.
- In one recent incident reported in Northern Ireland, a ransomware attack resulted in a significant data breach from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that resulted in victim information being posted onto specialist "data leak" sites. This type of attack potentially allows the offender(s) to blackmail both the NGO and the victims whose data has been leaked.
- **Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) Attacks**, where cyber criminals overwhelm websites and force them offline. They are illegal in the UK under the Computer Misuse Act 1990. Such attacks cause harm to businesses and organisations across all sectors, including critical national infrastructure and often prevent people from accessing essential public and administration services, including emergency services.
- **Social Media Hacking** is the most reported Computer Misuse Act (CMA) offence in Northern Ireland - this is the same across the UK. This area of cyber crime does not require significant skill by criminals and is often linked to social engineering and the exploitation of accounts. This can be facilitated through the compromise of linked email accounts and a lack of 2-step verification (2SV). Victims can face a ransom demand for the return of accounts and/or a threat of exposure of sensitive information or imagery. A further risk is the use of the victim's account to target friends and family in respect of further financial scams (e.g. concert tickets, cryptocurrency investment scams and sale of high value goods, such as vehicles).

Cyber-enabled crime

Cyber-enabled crime is where ICT has been used to further develop the scale and scope of criminality, e.g. purchase frauds that are facilitated by social media sites, shopping and auction sites and online forums. In Northern Ireland, fraudsters frequently target online shopping and auctions sites in order to scam unsuspecting consumers out of money. Sometimes this involves the sale of goods through seemingly professional, but actually fake, businesses. In other cases the fraud is less sophisticated, e.g. posting something for sale online and then requesting a deposit from would-be purchasers, before disappearing. In these cases, the fraudster will then often reappear under a different name and using different contact details.

Phishing is another example of cyber-enabled crime that is frequently seen in Northern Ireland. Phishing is widely known as being orientated through cyber-enabled fraud via email scams (e.g. scam emails sent to private account). However, cyber criminals also use elaborate phishing techniques to gain unauthorised access to systems. For example, public and private sectors continue to face such phishing attacks through spoof business emails, compromised accounts and impersonated websites/ malicious links.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Investigating the cyber-enabled aspects of OCGs' criminality has become 'normal business' for detectives working within PSNI Organised Crime Branch. Officers and staff within the PSNI Cyber Crime Centre offer ongoing support in respect of cyber enabled crime and continue to investigate large-scale cyber- dependent crimes. PSNI works alongside partner agencies to raise awareness and encourage prevention by individuals and businesses, encourage increased confidence in the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and achieve successful outcomes, thereby increasing reporting to disrupt OCGs involved in cyber-related activities.



The PSNI Cyber Prevent Officer has delivered presentations to school and college pupils and youth groups, in a variety of locations, as well as providing prevention advice to local businesses. There is ongoing collaboration between agencies in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the response to existing and emerging threats.

The PSNI Cyber Crime Centre continues to take part in annual CyberNI Weeks. The aim of this annual campaign is to further strengthen the collaborative commitment to raising cyber security awareness locally through a wide range of events across government, industry, academia, charity and the voluntary sector.



Exercise Ludgate: Cross Border Cyber Attack Contingency Scenario:

In co-operation with the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau, PSNI cyber investigators took part in a cross border scenario-based exercise which embodied investigations, Cyber Protect mitigation response, Cyber Prevent and Intelligence. The scenario was moderated and presented by the PSNI and An Garda Síochána (AGS) jointly and developed mitigation responses to DDoS and Ransomware attacks on infrastructure. The scenario embodied Pursue, Prepare/Protect and Prevent elements. The exercise was highly successful and established protocols of communication and incident response in partnership. Exercise Ludgate 2 took place in Belfast in November 2024.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

HACKING SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

PSNI officers investigated a case of hacking of social media accounts by a Registered Sex Offender using social engineering in seeking intimate images and attempting to get other images/ videos from partners of victims.

Following a successful investigation and prosecution, the following outcomes were achieved;

- over 80 victims identified;
- 62 charges, with guilty pleas in respect of 49, leading to three years in custodial sentences;
- two year sentence for Computer Misuse Act offences;
- ten year Sexual Offences Prevention Order & Sex Offenders Register;
- three year sentence for Attempted Blackmail;
- three year sentence for Attempted Intimidation;
- 12 months for each Harassment, Disclosing Private sexual photographs and Fraud;
- two years and six months for attempting to cause person to engage in sexual activity;
- 12 months for Voyeurism; and
- two years breach of Sexual Offences Prevention Order.

CASE STUDY

PSNI CYBER CRIME CENTRE PHISHING CAMPAIGN

In June 2023, the PSNI Cyber Protect Officer commenced research on a phishing campaign being observed by organisations across Northern Ireland. Having identified how the campaign was operating, the Cyber Protect Officer issued an alert to various business bodies and over the course of six weeks identified in excess of 25 organisations as having suffered a compromised email account. The impact of the account compromises ranged from potential unauthorised access to data to loss of funds due to mandate fraud. Supported by colleagues in the Cyber Investigation Team, the Protect Officer delivered advice to all identified organisations impacted by the phishing campaign.

FORWARD LOOK

Cyber dependent and cyber enabled crime continues to evolve and adapt with the development and availability of new technology. OCGs are quick to adopt new technologies, such as encrypted messaging services, and to exploit new market opportunities such as online marketplaces. Law enforcement agencies continue to adapt their response accordingly.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There is a wealth of information available to help individuals or organisations take action to protect accounts, network and data. Taking some simple steps around passwords, backups, updates and two factor authentication can help prevent the majority of cyber incidents seen across Northern Ireland. The following websites offer up to date advice and tools to help manage the threats:

Cyber Aware - www.cyberaware.gov.uk

National Cyber Security Centre - www.ncsc.gov.uk

Action Fraud - www.actionfraud.police.uk

Northern Ireland Cyber Security Centre - www.nicybersecuritycentre.gov.uk

Police CyberAlarm - www.cyberalarm.police.uk

Email health check - www.haveibeenpwned.com

If you have been a victim of actual or attempted cyber-crime, please report it to:

- Action Fraud - www.actionfraud.police.uk
- Police Service of Northern Ireland Telephone 101
- Via the Police Service of Northern Ireland website www.psni.police.uk/makeareport
- Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org

If you have received a suspicious email, please forward it to report@phishing.gov.uk and see National Cyber Security Centre - NCSC.GOV.UK for more information.

If you need to report a suspicious website

<https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/section/about-this-website/report-scam-website>

If you receive a suspicious SMS, please send this to your mobile network provider by forwarding it to 7726.

If you think you have been a victim of fraud, contact your bank immediately and report it to Action Fraud - www.actionfraud.police.uk or call **0300 123 2040**

You can also report any suspicious activity to:

- PSNI Telephone 101
- Via the PSNI website www.psni.police.uk/makeareport
- Crimestoppers Telephone 0800 555 111 (anonymously)
- Via Crimestoppers-uk.org website (anonymously)

3.2 DRUGS

THE THREAT

The majority of organised crime groups (OCGs) currently being investigated by PSNI are involved in the importation and/or supply of illicit drugs. Whilst heroin, cocaine and cannabis remain of concern in Northern Ireland, changes in the drugs market at a global and European level are also being reflected locally. The emergence of new synthetic drugs, new formats, and the availability of potentially counterfeit/ mispackaged/misdescribed drugs online are of particular concern. Vaping has become something of a trend amongst younger people, with some schools reporting issues with pupils vaping synthetic substances including 'Spice' and synthetic forms of cannabis (THC), in some cases leading to hospitalisation.

Class A

Cocaine is the most seized Class A drug in Northern Ireland, seized in 94% of all drug seizure incidents involving Class A drugs recorded by PSNI in the 2023/24 financial year.

Cocaine supplied in Northern Ireland generally has low but inconsistent purity levels, due, in part to the use of different supply routes, and the number of times it has been 'cut' with other powders prior to reaching the end user. These factors make the effects of cocaine use even more unpredictable because users can never be sure of the content or strength.

The heroin market is being complicated by the availability of synthetic opioids, a trend that is being seen at a global level. As at 20 March 2024, 15 new synthetic opioids (14 of which are nitazenes) were classified as Class A under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, due to the threats posed. Nitazenes have recently been found in Northern Ireland, both at seizure incidents and at scenes of suspected drug-related deaths.

Class B

The Northern Ireland drugs market remains dominated by cannabis. Cannabis cultivation facilities continue to be found locally; some involve foreign national OCGs bringing expertise into the country that allows the setup of sophisticated facilities. The properties used to house these facilities are often rented and the resulting damage caused can be catastrophic and negatively affect neighbouring properties.

Additionally, the cannabis market now increasingly includes other formats such as oils, vapes and edibles.

The popularity of vaping, particularly among young people, provides OCGs with an even wider market of vulnerable users. There is evidence of local production of cannabis edibles, further increasing the risks to users.

Class C

The availability and abuse of counterfeit and contraband prescription only medications (POMs) also remains an area of particular concern. These are often purchased online but are also sold by OCGs involved in the supply of other drugs. The market for POMs is complex. In some instances, individuals have become addicted following a period of legitimate use; when the medication was originally prescribed by a medical professional but has since been stopped. Those who continue to use POMs against medical advice will often purchase online and are extremely vulnerable to inadvertently buying and using counterfeit versions. Some POMs are also attractive to individuals addicted to Class A drugs as a way of coping with 'lows'.

The illicit supply of POMs such as Pregabalin, whether diverted from the legitimate market, or from an illegitimate source and perhaps counterfeit, is a concern. The number of Pregabalin-related deaths alone is higher than heroin/morphine, cocaine and MDMA/ecstasy combined. It is not known how many of these deaths related to illicitly supplied Pregabalin, but many are known to have involved poly-drug use.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Law enforcement agencies, including PSNI, National Crime Agency (NCA), His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), and Border Force continue to work alongside partners, including Probation Board, Northern Ireland Prison Service, government departments and treatment services. This collaborative approach allows a combined response, ensuring prevention, protection and prosecution outcomes.

RESULTS

Border Force Results

Herbal Cannabis remains the drug seized most often by Border Force in Northern Ireland. Packages are often detected at parcel depots and smugglers use the 'little and often' method of importing by flooding the various depots with large amounts of parcels containing 1 or 2 Kg per parcel. Cannabis is generally being imported into Northern Ireland from Thailand, Canada, USA and GB.

There has been a large increase in seizures of illicit prescription medicines. Prescription medicines such as Pregabalin, Zopiclone and Diazepam are regularly being detected. Border Force continues to work alongside the PSNI and the Medicines Regulatory Group on imports of illicit prescription medicine, making referrals for further investigation, where appropriate. Most seizures originate from China or India via GB and are suspected to be counterfeit.

Op Mobiliser

Op Mobiliser was a joint Border Force/PSNI operation that targeted numerous fast parcel depots across Northern Ireland. Joint teams of Border Force officers and detectives from the PSNI Organised Crime Unit, supported by PSNI district officers and dog support, visited postal depots across Northern Ireland searching for illicit drugs, prescription medicines and any other illicit commodity. The operation was conducted over various phases during the year, with the main purpose being to;

- detect, disrupt and seize illicit goods being moved through fast parcel depots; and
- fill intelligence gaps around suspect importations by working proactively with other law enforcement agencies.

Op Pangea

Op Pangea is an international initiative, led by Interpol, that concentrates on illicit prescription medicines and is a prime example where collaborative working has resulted in hundreds of thousands of illicit tablets being seized. Further details can be found in Chapter 5.

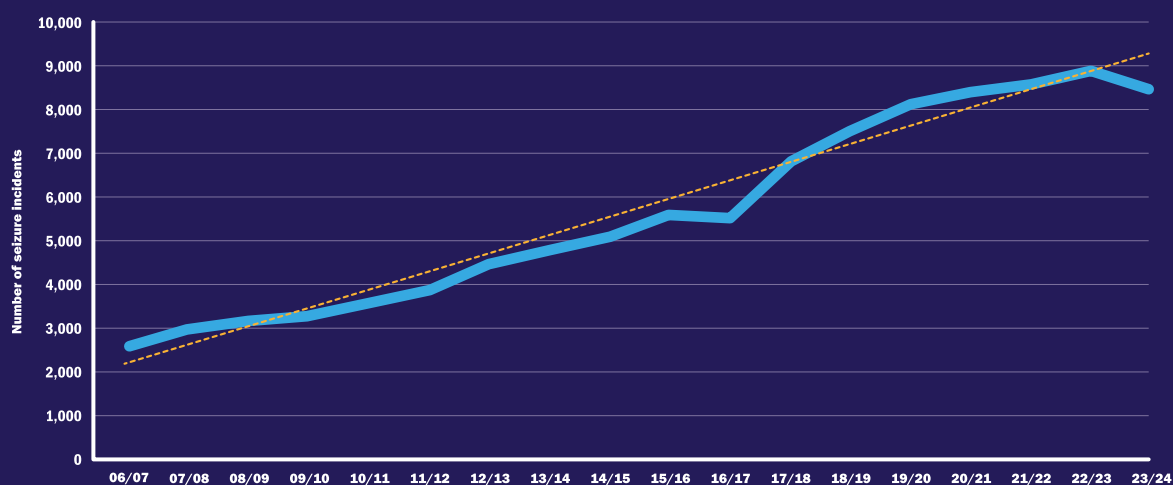
PSNI Results

Drugs with an estimated street value of over £20.8 million were seized by PSNI Organised Crime Branch (OCB) in the 2023/24 financial year. During this period PSNI recorded 8,472 drug seizure incidents.

Since 2006/07, the trend has been upward, with the number of seizure incidents recorded in 2023/24 (8,472) over three times the number recorded in 2006/07 (2,590).

Please note these figures only represent seizures by PSNI. UK Border Force and National Crime Agency seizures within Northern Ireland are not represented in these figures.

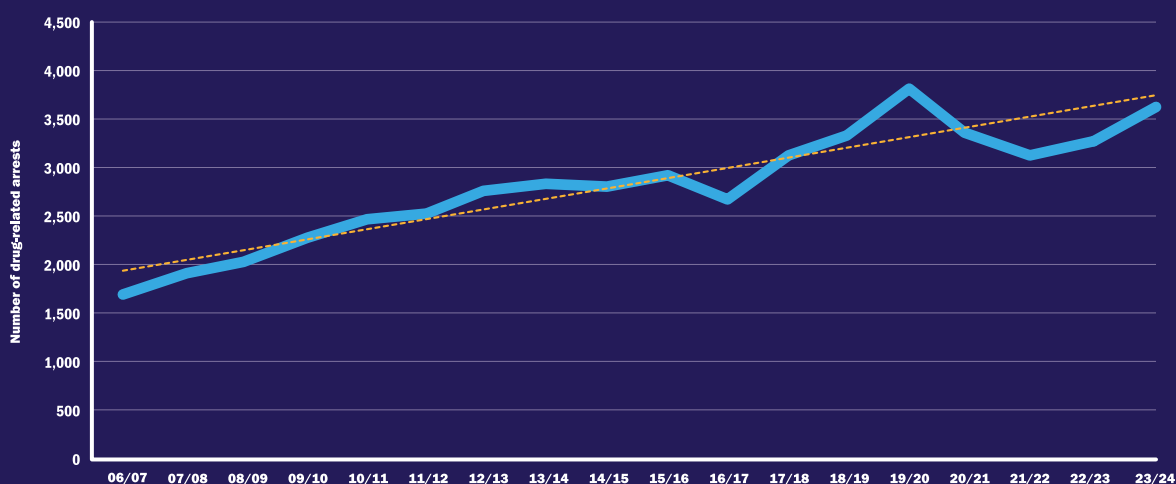
Drug Seizure Incidents between 2006/07 and 2023/24



NB: PSNI Drug seizure incidents by financial year, 2006/07 – 2023/24. [The dashed line illustrates the long-term upwards trend]

When 2023/24 is compared with 2022/23, increases are seen in relation to the number of seizures of Class A and Class C, specifically cocaine, ecstasy, Pregabalin and 'other Class C' (which includes tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/ GBL, Nitrous Oxide and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon)).

PSNI Drug-Related Arrests between 2006/07 and 2023/24



During this financial year, PSNI recorded 3,580 drug-related arrests. This equates to a 10% increase on the previous financial year (3,244 in 2022/23). The long-term trend since 2006/07 is upwards, with over twice as many arrests in 2023/24 than in 2006/07 (1,707).

Drug seizures* by class and drug type

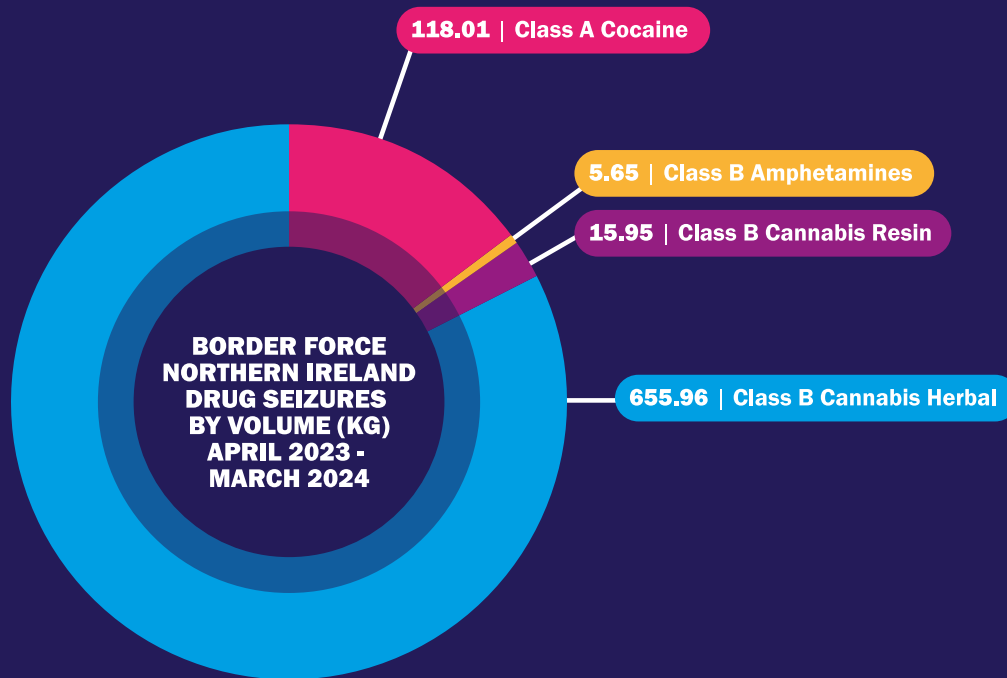
Drug class	Drug type	Drug seizure incidents		
		Apr 22-Mar 23	Apr 23-Mar 24	change
Class A	Cocaine	1,495	1599	104
	Ecstasy	96	150	54
	Heroin	150	73	-77
	LSD	20	19	-1
	Methadone	11	16	5
	Morphine	17	12	-5
	Other Class A	92	149	57
	All Class A	1,797	1,911	114
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	5,456	4710	-746
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	250	187	-63
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	65	56	-9
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	694	672	-22
	Total cannabis	6,072	5,297	-775
	Amphetamines	102	114	12
	Mephedrone	4	4	0
	Other Class B	227	423	196
	All Class B	6,249	5,617	-623
Class C	Anabolic steroids	47	36	-11
	Benzodiazepines	1,139	1,218	79
	Gabapentin	86	68	-18
	Pregabalin	1,053	1,190	137
	Other Class C	247	310	63
	All Class C	2,101	2,312	211
All drugs		8,933	8,519	-414

*As each seizure incident can involve more than one class or type of drug, seizure figures for individual drugs cannot be added together to produce totals as this will sum to more than the total number of seizures.

- Cannabis remains the most commonly seized drug in Northern Ireland in 2023/24, followed by cocaine, benzodiazepines and pregabalin.
- The number of cannabis cultivation facilities found locally is declining; however, cannabis edibles are becoming more readily available. These edibles are often falsely advertised as containing CBD only. Edibles packaging can be made to impersonate that of known confectionary items, making them particularly attractive to children.
- In relation to vapes/vape liquids, often the consumer is aware they are buying an illicit product, but they are attracted by the reduced prices and are naïve to the dangers of inconsistent chemical compositions and the health risks posed.

The popularity of vaping, particularly among young people, provides OCGs with an even wider market of vulnerable users.

- The increase in 'Other Class A' is likely to be largely attributable to the availability of new synthetic drugs. These are of particular concern due to their inconsistent and unpredictable chemical compositions and strengths.



Additional Seizures

National Crime Agency Seizures

- 132 Kg of Cocaine
- 300 Kg of Cannabis

Border Force seizure incidents by drug class:

- Class A 22
- Class B 172
- Class C 111

PSNI CASE STUDY

OPERATION SUBREFERENCE

PSNI officers took part in a dedicated focus day on proactive policing. In June, Operation Subreference used Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology to support policing and resulted in 30 key arrests. Assisting in the operation were Road Policing Interceptor vehicles who used ANPR to detect and disrupt criminals using Northern Ireland's road network. A total of 171 vehicles were detected and drugs with a combined worth of £94,720 were taken off the streets. In addition, the operation also built on ongoing work with partner organisations, including HMRC which resulted in seizures of illicit cigarettes, tobacco and fuel in a number of areas.

PSNI CASE STUDY

HERBAL CANNABIS SEIZED IN BELFAST

During June 2023, officers from the PSNI Auto Crime Team and Organised Crime Branch recovered suspected herbal cannabis with an estimated street value of around £2 million. Alongside colleagues from Border Force, PSNI officers stopped and searched a heavy goods vehicle in the Belfast Harbour area during which approximately 130 Kg of suspected herbal cannabis, with an estimated street value of around £2 million, was located concealed amongst mattresses and tents, inside a trailer being towed by the vehicle. A 25 year old man was arrested for numerous drugs offences, including possession of a Class B controlled drug with intent to supply. He was later charged to appear at Laganside Magistrates Court.



PSNI CASE STUDY

PSNI'S LARGEST SEIZURE OF COCAINE

In December 2023, PSNI Neighbourhood Policing Team (NPT) officers, on a routine patrol, stopped a lorry that was involved in suspicious activity. A subsequent search of the vehicle revealed a large quantity of suspected cocaine concealed within boxes containing frozen meat products, worth an estimated street value of £10 million. A man, aged 38, was arrested at the scene on suspicion of a number of driving-related offences. PSNI Organised Crime Branch commenced a robust investigation, and detectives later charged him to appear at Newry Magistrates Court with a number of offences, including possession of Class A controlled drugs, driving while disqualified and paying for sexual services.

This was the largest seizure of suspected cocaine in Northern Ireland ever made by the PSNI. This significant quantity of drugs would have been distributed and sold in local communities across Northern Ireland, causing untold harm.



Seized vehicle



Seized packages containing cocaine



Seizure of suspected Class A drugs

BORDER FORCE CASE STUDIES

**LARGE CANNABIS SEIZURE –
OVER 300 KG OF CANNABIS
SEIZED**

Border Force worked collaboratively with the NCA after a 40ft lorry was intercepted after it departed from Birkenhead. The goods were manifested as 'Monster' soft drinks. The vehicle was X-rayed and found to contain over 300 Kg of herbal cannabis. The driver was arrested and the case was adopted by the NCA for further investigation.



BORDER FORCE CASE STUDIES

**LARGE COCAINE SEIZURE – 118
KG SEIZED**

Border Force, working with the PSNI Organised Crime Unit, detected 118 Kg of cocaine in two large crates that had been modified with reinforced concrete, plywood and steel to try and prevent canine or x-ray detection. The street value was approximately £10 million. The vehicle was X-rayed by Border Force and anomalies were found in two crates. This was the largest cocaine seizure in Northern Ireland.



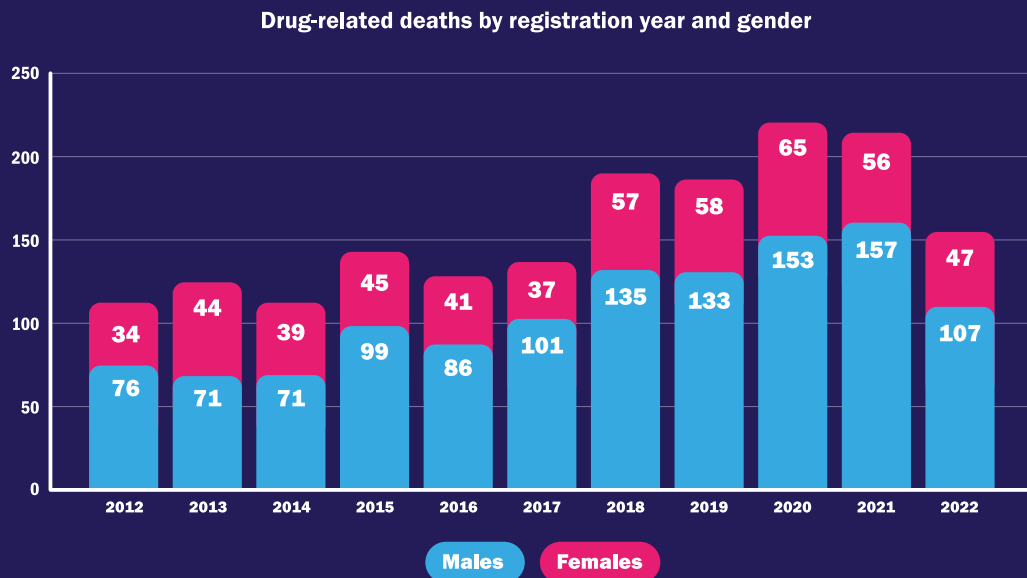
BORDER FORCE CASE STUDIES

**LARGE PRESCRIPTION
TABLET SEIZURE – 500,000
PREGABALIN TABLETS SEIZED**

Border Force officers detected a large amount of Pregabalin tablets that had arrived at a parcel depot from India via GB. It was highly likely that the tablets were counterfeit; the seizure was adopted by the PSNI Organised Crime Unit who arrested a male in connection with the find.



Drug related deaths 2012 – 2022



- There were 154 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2022.
- Since 2012, Northern Ireland has seen deaths due to drug-related causes rise by 98% from 110 to a peak of 218 in 2020 and to 213 in 2021.
- The 2022 total (154) represents a 40% increase on the number of drug deaths registered a decade ago.
- The majority (82.5%) of all drug-related deaths in 2022 were classed as drug misuse deaths (where the underlying cause is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence or where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved).
- Of the 154 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2022, over two-thirds (69.5%) were men.

FORWARD LOOK

Law enforcement agencies (LEAs) will continue to work with partners, facilitated by the OCTF, in order to identify and mitigate threats as they emerge. The OCTF Drugs Group meets regularly to discuss the drugs market in Northern Ireland, including horizon scanning and analysis of the local drugs market in order to identify emerging issues and threats at an early stage.

Partners also use this forum to identify where they can work collaboratively to best mitigate these threats.

Collaborative work is ongoing in respect of existing areas of particular concern, including the emergence of, and dangers related to, new synthetic drugs, and the emergence of new formats such as edibles.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you see or suspect drug dealing in your area help stop it:

- Report it to the police on 101
- Via the PSNI website www.psni.police.uk/makeareport
- Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org
- www.talktofrank.com/news/spiking

3.3 ECONOMIC CRIME

THE THREAT

Law enforcement agencies use asset recovery powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) to recover ill-gotten gains. Criminal confiscation is the most commonly used power under POCA. Confiscation proceedings can be brought following a criminal conviction involving financial gain or the laundering of criminal assets. Any criminal financial gain will be calculated during proceedings and the Court may make a Confiscation Order. Removing profits that fund crime is a helpful disruption tool, breaking the cycle of criminal activity to prevent further offences occurring.

Fraud

Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in fraud, based in Northern Ireland and further afield, continue to prey on innocent members of local communities. These offenders are particularly heinous due to their targeting of vulnerable victims. Despite ongoing awareness campaigns, members of the public continue to be tricked by so-called scammers. In some instances, the levels of expertise shown by the OCGs makes their phone calls/emails/letters difficult to identify as fake. In other instances, less 'professional' OCGs successfully dupe unsuspecting victims, particularly where those targeted are vulnerable through age and/or circumstances.

In the 2023/24 financial year, there were 3,815 reports made to Action Fraud about fraud in Northern Ireland, resulting in £16 million in reported losses. Of these, 23% (896 reports) were in relation to Online Shopping and Auctions frauds.

Money laundering and the physical movement of cash

OCGs continue to launder money through bank accounts and by using shell companies, money service bureaux (MSBs) and cash businesses. This type of activity is sometimes facilitated through professional facilitators, such as corrupt solicitors and accountants.

A vast amount of cash moves through Northern Ireland's ports and airports. In March 2024 alone, there were seizures at Belfast International Airport of sterling, euros, US dollars, Mexican dollars, and Chinese yuan, and also euros at Belfast Seaport.

In May 2024, the first unexplained Wealth Order was granted in Northern Ireland. The Order, secured by the NCA through the High Court in Belfast, compels a husband and wife, to explain the source of funds used to construct a £275,000 property in County Armagh

Illegal money lending

Whilst it is widely accepted there are illegal money lenders operating in communities, reports to PSNI remain limited. Those who have borrowed money from so-called 'loan sharks' are often vulnerable and/or living in poverty. Illegal money lending has traditionally been carried out by members and former members of former/existing paramilitary groups, many of whom still elicit fear within local communities. A failure to repay the debt, alongside extortionate interest rates, can lead to a 'debt spiral', where the original debt continues to rise and becomes unmanageable. Those unable to pay are often threatened with violence, damage to property and community excommunication.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

OCTF agencies can draw on powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA)¹ 2002 to seek to recover criminal assets. Asset recovery is the means to recover wealth and property gained under fraudulent means, as well as prevent money laundering and the reinvestment of criminal funds into further crime and harm. The seizure and confiscation of assets acquired by criminals is a powerful tool in the fight against organised crime. It is a means to both dismantle and disrupt the activity of organised crime groups and the individuals connected to them. Much of the money recovered through relevant POCA powers is reinvested, either into projects aimed at benefitting communities by tackling crime and reducing the fear of crime or into reinforcing law enforcement's capability to disrupt criminal activity through the pursuit of criminal assets.

Fraud

PSNI officers continue to work in partnership with both Action Fraud and Scamwise NI. The objective of the Scamwise NI partnership is to engage and inform the community about the risks of scams and the range of scams that exist. The partnership is mindful of the particular need to provide information to assist the more vulnerable in our society and highlight the number of scams to them. Encouraging people to discuss the topic of scams with friends and families, to report scams, help protect and support each other against scams, forms the campaign's ethos.

ActionFraud
 Report Fraud & Internet Crime
actionfraud.police.uk

Action Fraud logo

**If you can spot
a scam, you can
stop a scam**

Stay 4 steps ahead of a scam by using this **scam test**

Seems too good to be true

Contacted out of the blue

Asks for personal details

Money is requested

for help and information, or to report a scam visit
nidirect.gov.uk/scamwiseNI

scamwiseNI
 PARTNERSHIP

Scamwise leaflet

Money laundering and physical movement of cash

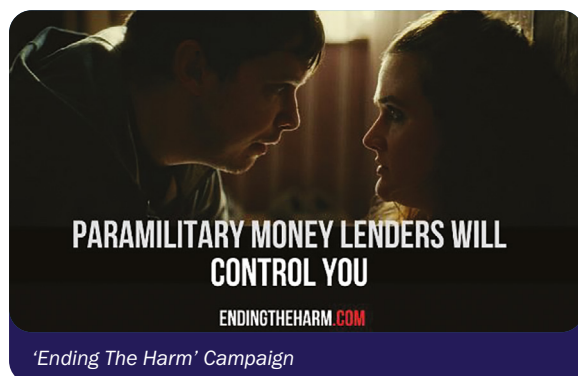
Law enforcement agencies continue to seize cash and other assets as a key part of operations against OCGs. Agencies also work in partnership to carry out operations at ports and airports in Northern Ireland.

Illegal money lending

The Crimestoppers Predatory Money Lending Campaign is currently running in Northern Ireland, with the backing of the PSNI, the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, and Advice NI. The independent charity, police and partners are reaching out to communities to encourage the public to speak up.

The 'Ending The Harm' Campaign is also ongoing, with a dedicated advice website at www.endingtheharm.com

1 POCA – Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/29/contents>



PSNI officers remain committed to breaking the negative influence of illegal money lenders on local communities, and will continue to investigate the organised criminals involved, but they cannot act without the help of members of the communities affected. Those who have become caught up in a debt spiral and/or feel threatened, should not hesitate in reporting the situation, whether that be by making an official report, or by confidentially reporting via Crimestoppers. Remaining silent allows these criminals to continue to line their own pockets at the expense of the communities they exploit.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

VALUABLE ASSETS SEIZED

During an investigation into the importation of Class B drugs, PSNI Organised Crime Branch conducted a search and arrested a 50 year old man. He was later released on police bail to allow for further enquiries to be conducted. As part of a related search in the Carrickfergus area, a number of items were seized, including suspected Class A, B and C controlled drugs, a conducted energy device and a motorcycle. The seizure of this motorcycle demonstrates that officers remain committed to tackling the way in which criminal profits are hidden in valuable assets by seizing items from criminals.



Seized motorcycle

CASE STUDY

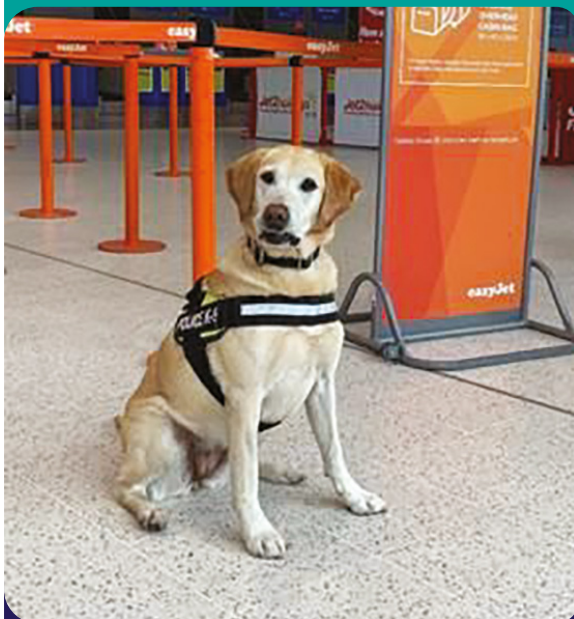
MONEY SERVICE BUREAUX COMPLIANCE VISITS

In September 2023, officers from PSNI Economic Crime Unit assisted HMRC with a number of compliance visits to Money Service Bureaux (MSBs) across Northern Ireland. Approximately 12 visits took place over two days resulting in £600k cash being seized by HMRC officers under Proceeds of Crime legislation with the intention of forfeiture and possible closure of these Bureaux.

CASE STUDY

CASH DETECTION DOG SEARCHES LUGGAGE AT AIRPORT

In July 2023, Border Force and PSNI officers worked in partnership to carry out searches at Belfast International Airport. The searches were carried out with the help of cash-detection police dog, Jess, who assisted in the searching of luggage, looking for suspiciously large amounts of cash that may be linked to illegal activity – namely, money laundering.



Jess, cash-detection dog

Charitable donation

In May 2024 detectives from PSNI donated £3,403 to local charity AWARE NI, following a successful conviction. The money was seized by police following a large-scale supply of drugs investigation. As part of these investigations and subsequent court cases, a disposal of cash order was obtained from the Court.



PSNI cheque handover to AWARENI

Total cash and assets seized from criminals

Number and value of restraint orders, confiscation orders, cash seizures, Account Freezing Orders (AFOs) and Listed Assets (LAs) and subsequent forfeiture.

1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024		
	Quantity	Value
Restraint Orders	13	£1,108,000*
Cash Seizures	93	£1,488,045*
Listed Assets (LA)	9	£12,422.00*
AFOs	72	£1,440,166
Total (Value)	187	£4,048,634*
Confiscation Orders	11**	£936,923
Cash Forfeitures	78	£544,365
LA Forfeitures	1	£2,372
AFO Forfeitures	16	£284,375
Total (Value)	106	£1,768,036

*Figure includes estimated amounts

**Number of orders including joint liability orders-figure for joint liability included

FORWARD LOOK

Partner agencies continue to share information at an early stage where new and/or emerging threats are identified. Fraud alerts are regularly shared between partners and subsequently with the public, often via social media. This allows agencies to better understand the modus operandi being used locally.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Report concerns or suspected economic criminal activity:

- Call police on 101
- Use the PSNI website www.psnipolice.uk/makeareport
- Call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org

3.4 INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CRIME AND SCAMS

THE THREAT

The counterfeit goods market remains diverse; it includes electronics, clothing and footwear, tobacco, vapes, cosmetics, personal hygiene products and medicines. Simply put, anything with a marketable value is attractive to counterfeit goods producers and suppliers. At a local level the market is likely to have grown due, in part, to the so-called 'cost of living crisis', alongside the ever-evolving online availability.

Counterfeit items are imported via fast-parcel deliveries, as well as in larger quantities via container shipments. Counterfeit items are usually of poor quality and will not meet health and safety regulations.

In more recent years, the evolution of online television services has led to an emerging market for illicit products to allow the circumventing of fees; modified Firesticks are becoming increasingly popular. These devices allow access to unauthorised sites that illegally stream television series, films and sports events. These sites often host cyber threats, such as malware, that can lead to the compromise of personal data and/or damage devices.

Other threats include local supply of counterfeit medicines and veterinary products. Counterfeit and unlicensed medicines are regularly seized in Northern Ireland and have caused deaths locally, due to their inconsistent chemical compositions and potencies.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Law enforcement agencies continue to work alongside partners, including brand owners, often facilitated via the OCTF framework. Regular operations take place at ports and airports, and checks are conducted at postage hubs, parcel depots, and storage facilities.

RESULTS

CASE STUDIES

COUNTERFEIT DESIGNER GOODS SEIZED

During January 2024, detectives from Organised Crime Branch arrested a 36-year-old man on suspicion of being concerned in the sale of suspected counterfeit goods. The man was arrested, in the Glenavy area and was later released on police bail to allow for further enquiries. Over 1,000 items of suspected counterfeit clothing, footwear and electrical equipment were seized during this investigation. The initial assessment by police is that these counterfeit designer goods would have represented a £130,000 loss of value to the brands concerned.



A selection of counterfeit items seized in Glenavy

TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE (TSS)

THE THREAT – MASS MARKETING FRAUD AND SCAMS

There has been an increase in phone-enabled scams targeting elderly and vulnerable victims and scam mail is now repeatedly targeting people who have been victims in the past. Telephone based frauds around white goods cover and green energy is also on the increase.

In addition, there has been a marked increase in cryptocurrency investment scams with consumers often losing over £50,000. Scammers are inducing victims to take out multiple loans to facilitate bogus cryptocurrency investments.

Non-UK call centres use data harvesting and selling victim lists to UK criminal enterprises to target UK consumers.

TSS has also seen an increase in clairvoyant and religious mailings which are menacing in content as well as requiring personal details of recipient.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Scams

The Department for the Economy (DfE) Trading Standards Service (TSS) works to tackle mass marketing scams and disrupt the operations of perpetrators behind mail scams. It works in partnership with other agencies, including the National Trading Standards Scams Team to identify and support victims of mass marketing fraud and reach out to all the known victims of scams in Northern Ireland, who have sent money to scammers.

In most cases, victims have lost thousands of pounds and have been identified as vulnerable. TSS officers provide advice and support to victims and investigate the scams, taking enforcement action where possible.

Ongoing criminal investigations, as well as a robust education and awareness-raising policy, has brought the problem of scams to the forefront of the public's attention. TSS continues as a member of the Scamwise NI partnership, which shares intelligence and helps formulate strategy and policy on protecting vulnerable consumers in Northern Ireland.

Many frauds perpetrated online, work on the basis that large numbers of victims lose relatively small sums of money so may be less likely to complain. However, some scams can have a devastating impact on those targeted, financially, emotionally, and physically. The UK Government published a Fraud Strategy (May 2023) that sets out a plan to reduce fraud by 10%, on the 2019 levels, by December 2024.

During the reporting period, TSS worked pro-actively to combat mass marketed scams and their involvement included;

- continued participation in ScamwiseNI Partnership with over 30 partner organisations, including PSNI, the Commissioner for Older People, the Consumer Council and Age Sector Platform. The objective of the Partnership is to engage and inform the community about the risks and range of scams that exist;
- TSS regularly issue warnings advising people to remain vigilant following a rise in reports of scams;
- working with advertisers to prevent scammers from posting adverts;
- providing evidence/intelligence to the National Trading Standards Scams Team, enabling the team to investigate further and disrupt scammers. Provision of evidence and intelligence has led to the shutdown of PO Boxes and the interception of mail and money. TSS subsequently return money and paperwork to the victims whilst taking the opportunity to educate victims on how to spot a scam in the future;
- TSS continue to install call blocking devices in the homes of known vulnerable scam victims;
- TSS continue to raise awareness regarding scams; this includes issuing press releases during scam awareness month, using social media and providing awareness sessions to local community groups; and
- directing scam victims to sign-up to Mail Preference Service and Telephone Preference Service in order to reduce the amount of scam calls/mail received resulting in a reduction of money lost due to scams.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

IDENTITY THEFT RESULTING IN £70K IN LOANS

TSS were contacted by a lady who lost £82,000 after investing in what she believed was Artificial Intelligence research. She initially invested £12,000; however, the scammers tricked her into providing remote access and supplying her personal information which resulted in £70,000 in loans being taken out in her name. The victim has raised complaints with her bank and they have recovered £9,000 however the lenders continue to pursue her for the loans. TSS have continued to provide support and assistance in raising a complaint with her bank, the loan providers and the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS).

CASE STUDY

ELDERLY MAN LOST £80K

TSS were involved in a case of an elderly man who sent more than £80,000 in cash after receiving various letters claiming he had won the "FIFA International World Cup Lottery". The letter explained due to Covid there had been delay in notifying him. He was targeted for months and sent all payments to scammers through the post. TSS officers visited and determined he had very little knowledge regarding scams. He has received support and advice on how to identify any further letters and has been provided with advice on telephone scams.

CASE STUDY

£415K LOST IN CRYPTOCURRENCY SCAM INVOLVING AN ADVERT FEATURING ELON MUSK

TSS were notified of a man who lost more than £415,000 in a cryptocurrency scam after responding to an online advert featuring the image of Elon Musk. The scam took place over an 11 month period and he believed he was making money after scammers downloaded a fake trading platform to his computer. TSS officers provided support and advice and have assisted in helping to raise complaints with both his bank and the FOS. His bank was only able to recover £4,500 and FOS has recommended that his bank return £175k plus interest to the victim.

CASE STUDY

£200K LOST FOLLOWING ADVERT REGARDING FALSE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

TSS were notified of a woman who lost more than £200,000 after responding to an advert on Facebook offering investments in Unilever, BP and Shell. The scammer spent hours communicating with the woman every day, building up her trust. Despite warnings from her family, she continued to invest. She had taken out various loans, borrowed money from friends and cashed in ISAs and bonds. She was also convinced to purchase a new car worth £17,000 and was provided with a fake document confirming she had the funds available to purchase a £350,000 property. TSS officers continue to visit to provide emotional support and assistance in raising complaints.

CASE STUDY

£170K LOST THROUGH A TELEPHONE INVESTMENT SCAM

TSS helped an elderly woman who lost £170,000 through a telephone investment scam. The woman was cold-called and believed she was speaking to highly successful banker who could make her a lot of money. Scammers convinced her to take out a loan and had gone as far as sending her a new laptop in order that she could make the transactions. TSS officers visited the woman and her family and installed call blockers and provided assistance and advice on how to raise a complaint with her bank. An investigation by her bank was launched and they agreed to return the full £170,000 lost. The woman and her family are delighted with this result.

THE THREAT - USED CAR CRIME

The second hand or used car market continues to be a priority area for TSS. Used car prices have increased significantly in the last 12 months, as supply chain issues continue to impact the availability of new cars and replacement car parts.

High prices and supply issues in the market are resulting in an increased supply of unroadworthy cars, particularly at the lower end of the market. There has been an increase in the number of complaints about clocking, fraudulent MOTs on cars coming from GB and documentation. Intelligence suggests that the demand for used cars, during the cost-of-living crisis, is being met by high mileage models sourced from auctions houses. Consumers are increasingly purchasing used cars from online marketplaces with traders operating across the country. This can often mean they do not know who they are buying from before making a purchase and have diminished consumer rights. This leaves them vulnerable to buying cars that are clocked, accident damaged or in poor condition.

RESULTS

CASE STUDIES

CAR TRADER GUILTY OF CHARGES UNDER THE FRAUD ACT 2006

A car trader pleaded guilty to five charges under the Fraud Act 2006 for selling clocked cars and was ordered to undertake 240 hours community service, to be completed within 12 months. A compensation order was also awarded to the four victims in this case totaling £7,920, to be paid within 12 weeks.

Investigations by the TSS revealed that the company had sold four vehicles to consumers with reduced mileages. The first vehicle was purchased by a consumer who saw the car advertised by the car dealer on Gumtree with 89,000 miles. Evidence revealed that the vehicle had travelled at least 120,597 miles.

Another customer reported that he purchased a Mercedes from the car dealer after seeing a Gumtree advertisement describing the vehicle with 92,000 miles when it had a previous recorded mileage of 120,178 miles. The vehicle was a Category N insurance - information that was not disclosed to the consumer before the purchase was made.

A third vehicle was sold as having mileage of 121,180, when the reality was it had done more than 172,000 miles. A fourth vehicle, an Audi A3, was sold with 125,000 miles having previously travelled 148,028 miles. The vehicle was returned to the car dealer on the basis of the mileage discrepancy. However, the car dealer then re-advertised the vehicle on Gumtree with the incorrect mileage. The vehicle was also being offered for sale with a false service history.

CASE STUDY

“CLOCKED” VEHICLES ADVERTISED ONLINE

A used car trader was advertising vehicles for sale on an online marketplace and an online classified advertisement website. TSS obtained evidence that ‘clocked’ vehicles had been sold to three victims and a further six ‘clocked’ vehicles were advertised by the trader. The seller purchased the vehicles from an auction house with high miles and then reduced the mileage before selling to his victims making a substantial profit. TSS has submitted a file to the PPS.

Internet and social media continue to be used by rogue traders to promote their services, along with telephone calls, emails, and leaflets that are used to engage with potential victims. There is infiltration by rogue traders into approved trader schemes and they use professional website developers, often using fake reviews, to appear genuine and reputable. Criminal business practices continue to include property improvements and maintenance work especially roofing and gardening services.

THE THREAT - DOORSTEP CRIME

Doorstep crime affects a large volume of consumers across Northern Ireland and is a priority work area for TSS. This type of crime is often aimed at elderly and vulnerable consumers and is considered as being “low risk” to many criminals, has appeal to OCGs and is seen as an additional revenue stream for other criminality.

Doorstep crime is carried out by unscrupulous individuals and groups who identify and prey on older or vulnerable members of society. Typically they call, uninvited and unexpectedly, at someone’s home and offer to carry out property repairs or gardening work. The householder is usually charged an exorbitant price for the work, which is often of poor quality or left unfinished. In some cases, the householder is asked for large sums of money upfront to pay for materials, only for the doorstep criminal never to return.

Doorstep criminals are mobile, work throughout Northern Ireland and across the border with Republic of Ireland. The impact on victims of doorstep crime can be devastating; they can lose trust in those who are close to them, shutting people out of their lives. There is evidence that suggests that some victims never recover from what has happened to them and they move into assisted accommodation sooner, as they are no longer able or confident enough to live alone.

In some instances, entire life savings are wiped out to pay for often unnecessary work, leaving the victim penniless and once independent individuals can find themselves having to rely on others and the state for support.

A vast number of doorstep crime cases go unreported, leaving the path clear for these criminals to devastate and destroy lives. There is also the impact that doorstep crime has on legitimate traders, drawing trade away from genuine local businesses who can help bolster the local economy.

TSS continues to work to tackle organised crime groups involved in doorstep crime, most notably through;

- successfully prosecuting doorstep criminals in the Magistrates and Crown Courts. The outcomes have included fines, suspended sentences and the ordering of compensation orders in favour of the members of the public who lodged complaints with the TSS and made witness statements;
- assisting PSNI by working jointly on investigations and providing advice to individual officers on consumer protection law as it applies to doorstep crime;
- working with other partner agencies to increase awareness and reduce the impact of doorstep crime while developing preventative actions to disrupt problem traders and reduce consumer detriment. A good example of this is the work being carried out with the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP), Crime Prevention and local residents on establishing “No Cold Calling” zones to deter the activities of doorstep and rogue criminals within specific residential areas;

- continuing to raise awareness of doorstep crime by participating in national schemes, such as the National Trading Standards' Doorstep Crime Campaign, organised in conjunction with Friends Against Scams; and
- constantly alerting the public to the dangers of doorstep crime through issuing press releases and distributing leaflets, e.g., recent publicity has been around the doorstep criminals' increasing presence on 'find a trader' websites.



RESULTS

CASE STUDIES

HOME IMPROVEMENT TRADER SENTENCED AFTER INVESTIGATION BY TSS

A self-employed trader from Lurgan who carried out a range of roofing, landscaping and paving work for nine individual consumers was sentenced to 100 hours community service. He was also banned from being the director of company for a total of five years. In a case brought by the TSS, the trader pleaded guilty to 20 charges under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008.

All nine victims complained to TSS after employing the roofer to carry out improvement works to their properties. Following an extensive investigation by TSS it was discovered that the trader took a total of £92,000 from the victims for work to be completed at their properties, including roofing, cladding, driveway repairs, gardening and landscaping. In all nine cases the victims were left with either unfinished work or with work that was carried out to an extremely poor standard.

CASE STUDY

COURT ORDERS COUNTY ARMAGH TRADER TO PAY £10,000 COMPENSATION TO VICTIM

A County Armagh trader pleaded guilty to five charges under The Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. The trader had quoted a significantly lower fee than he subsequently charged for the substandard works, and he failed to provide the victim with cancellation rights which is a legal requirement.

The victim engaged the services of the trader having obtained his contact details through an online platform. The online platform connects consumers with local tradespersons. The trader initially quoted £8,000. However, an additional £4,500 was soon requested. The victim paid the £12,500 reluctantly. It quickly became apparent that the work was substandard and flawed. As part of the investigation, the TSS commissioned an expert report on the works completed. The report concluded that the contractor's claim for an additional £4,500 was unjustified.

The trader was ordered to pay compensation of £10,000 to the victim for failing to complete external construction work to the victim's home to a satisfactory standard and misleading consumers. The trader was given a conditional discharge, suspended for two years.

THE THREAT - COUNTERFEIT GOODS

The most recent Consumer Council Pulse Survey [December 2023] indicated 53% of those surveyed felt their household was worse off when compared to 12 months before. This might make consumers more accepting of cheaper copies of designer and high value items. The increase in online shopping also makes consumers more vulnerable to unknowingly purchasing counterfeit items.

There continues to be availability of counterfeit goods being sold via online platforms; this is coupled with a rise in drop shipping websites where the trader does not hold any stock but arranges for the goods to be shipped directly to the consumer from China. The use of semi 'legitimate' Fulfilment Houses to facilitate the importation and distribution of often unsafe counterfeit goods continues to be a concern, as is the ongoing use of self-store facilities to import, manufacture, distribute and store counterfeit goods. The physical marketplace allows counterfeit goods, including dangerous consumer products, to be openly sold at markets, car boot sales and from retail/commercial premises.

Intellectual property crime remains a priority area for TSS. It is often the work of sophisticated OCGs capable of operating across UK and as well as other multiple countries in Europe and beyond. It is acknowledged that recorded incidents to Consumerline have reduced, however it is suspected that many intellectual property crime incidents go unreported by consumers, who are looking for a cheaper alternative especially with the cost-of-living crisis.

Online sellers of counterfeit products continue to take advantage of social media for such purposes, as well as physical markets across the UK. A key issue is the consumer's appetite for 'a bargain'. Consumer messaging is fragmented and many within local communities still see the sale of counterfeit goods as providing an opportunity for them to obtain 'designer branded goods' at far cheaper prices than the genuine article. There is no legal deterrent to stop a consumer buying a counterfeit product.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

TSS continues to target online sellers of counterfeit goods based in Northern Ireland. Officers have identified a number of traders selling fake items and investigations are carried out into their business activities. Among the items seized in respect of trademark abuse in the last year are designer clothes, handbags, car accessories, electrical items, confectionary, jewellery and mobile phone accessories.

TSS collaborates with partner bodies including UK Border Force, the Intellectual Property Office (IPO) and PSNI to identify and take action against those involved in intellectual property crime.

Tick Box. Keep it Real. Keep it Legal

TSS working in partnership with the IPO and with the support of the Self-Storage Association UK, launched this Scheme in Northern Ireland in 2023.

The scheme is open to all businesses within the self-storage industry who meet the minimum standards for the code. The primary aim is to make the industry aware of the use being made of the sector by criminals and in so doing prevent the storage of counterfeit and illicit goods, reduce the appeal of self-storage facilities to criminals and provide the industry with a means to report suspicious activities.

Businesses across Northern Ireland have signed up to the scheme and can use its logos in marketing materials and with their online presence, avail of the online training material and their business details will be added to the list of companies who have adopted the scheme on the code of practice website.

FORWARD LOOK

OCTF partner agencies continue to work together to allow early identification of emerging issues, and opportunities for joint operations.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Many counterfeits are difficult to spot but consumers should look out for poor packaging, bad spelling or printing, photocopied instructions and lack of regulatory markings.
- Do not be fooled, or enticed, by a replica logo or a seemingly cut-price designer product. Be mindful of where these goods have come from and where the ill-gotten profits will end up.
- Think about the cost – price is usually a good indicator as to whether goods are likely to be counterfeit.
- Be wary about buying branded goods particularly online and outside of usual premises.
- Remember, online photographs of genuine items can be used to promote items but the delivered goods may well be counterfeit.
- There are significant health and safety risks associated with counterfeit goods. Whether skincare, electrical items or children's costumes – these items do not undergo the testing and quality control that genuine items do. For example, a counterfeit children's costume will not have the necessary safety-release mechanism, and a counterfeit phone charger will not be up to fire safety standards.

Report your suspicions to:

- PSNI on 101
- The PSNI website www.psni.police.uk/makeareport
- Call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org
- Consumerline on 0300 123 62 62
- Trading standards at: www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/consumeraffairs/trading-standards-service

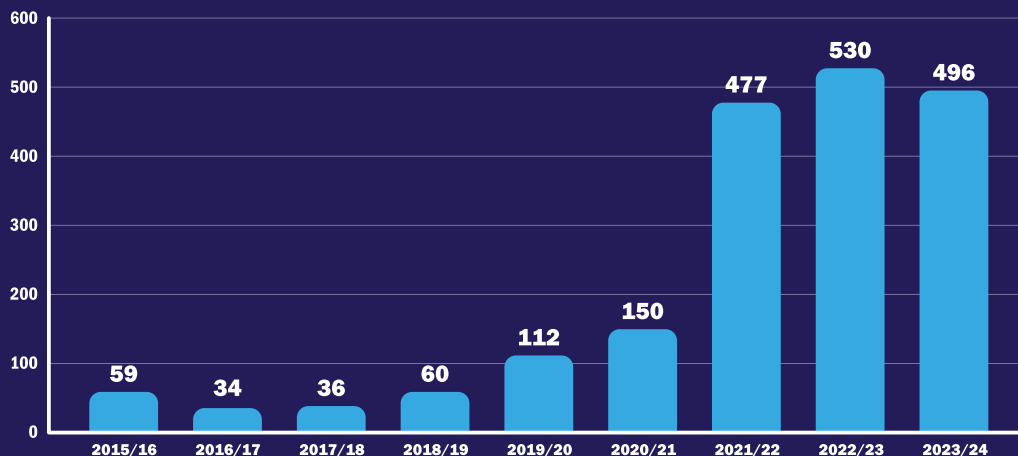
3.5 MODERN SLAVERY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) is an umbrella term that incorporates both the offence of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour and the offence of human trafficking. Victims are often afraid or unable to report their ordeal due to language barriers or because they are held captive. MSHT is an extremely lucrative criminal activity and is assessed to be the fastest growing international crime. Images of locked doors and victims in chains are commonplace. However, it can take many forms and situations and can at times appear normal until looked at more closely. Modern slavery is often referred to as crime “hidden in plain sight” and it is difficult to understand or quantify the true scale of this activity within Northern Ireland. The main driver of MSHT offending is the pursuit of profit by offenders who coerce victims into providing some sort of service.

THE THREAT

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying victims of trafficking and ensuring they receive the correct support. In 2023/24 the PSNI Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) received 496 NRM referrals (338 males and 158 females) from potential victims of human trafficking (PVoT) in Northern Ireland. This represented a slight decrease on the previous financial year (2022/23), when 530 referrals were received. The general trend remains upward.

NRM Referrals received by PSNI, by financial year 2015/16 - 2023/24



The increasing number of referrals does not necessarily imply a growing number of victims specifically within Northern Ireland as many other factors need to be taken into consideration, most notably the location of exploitation. Of the 496 NRM referrals received during 2023/24, only 19 alleged exploitation within Northern Ireland (4%); the rest alleged exploitation overseas.

Whilst NRM referrals offer a starting point for analysing the human trafficking and modern slavery issue it is also likely that many illegal immigrants, and the OCGs exploiting them, remain unknown to law enforcement agencies. Some are brought into the country specifically to work in clandestine operations, such as cannabis cultivation facilities. The traffickers are adept at terrifying their victims into remaining silent, by threatening them, and their families who often remain in their home countries. Some migrants will have been trafficked from countries with corrupt governments and law enforcement agencies; making them untrusting and/or scared of anyone in a position of authority.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Detectives within the PSNI MSHTU regularly work in partnership with a variety of other agencies, including NCA, HMRC, National Minimum Wage Team, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), Home Office Immigration Enforcement, Social Services and Border Force. MSHTU also collaborate with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through the Department of Justice (DOJ) NGO Engagement Group on modern slavery and human trafficking. The aim of this group is to bring together statutory bodies and charities, facilitating a partnership approach to the sharing and exchange of information, ideas and expertise. Many church and faith groups are members of this group, including International Justice Mission (IJM) and Hope for Justice. As a result of this forum, IJM now work with the PSNI to provide in-country support to repatriated victims in Romania, and Hope for Justice assist in the delivery of training to student officers.

Detectives within the MSHTU also run regular internal and external training courses to educate first responders and other interested parties on the signs and indicators of human trafficking and on the NRM process.

In May 2023, MSHTU officers addressed delegates at an international cross border conference on human trafficking. The conference, which took place in Romania, was hosted by the anti-trafficking charity International Justice Mission and was attended by police officers, prosecutors, national referral co-ordinators and embassy representatives from across Europe and the USA.

In October 2023, a multi-agency 'day of action' took place in Northern Ireland to mark the start of Anti-Slavery Week. This activity included:

- Visits to 83 estate agents to raise awareness of the use of properties by traffickers to house innocent victims;
- Visits to 40 hotels to engage with staff and raise awareness of the signs and indicators of human trafficking;
- Safeguarding and screening exercises at 'at risk' locations, including car washes, massage parlours, nail bars and brothels; and
- Overt presence at ports, airports and transport hubs to raise awareness and safeguard any potential victims.

#WEARENOTFORSALE



Bar code to symbolise how slavery treats people as objects to be bought, sold and exploited.

DoJ's Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation (MSHTCE) team engages formally with operational partners and other key stakeholders through both the OCTF MSHT Sub Group and the NGO Engagement Forum on a quarterly basis, providing an opportunity to discuss operational and strategic developments. Policy officials continue to engage with colleagues in UK Government and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, along with counterparts in Republic of Ireland.

Child Criminal Exploitation

DoJ is working with operational partners, including PSNI, to look at how the NRM is used to address child criminal exploitation (CCE) across the UK and consider improvements that could be made in the context of Northern Ireland. CCE is a form of modern slavery that involves the exploitation of children. A cross-government task and finish group, led by Departments of Justice and Health and reporting to the Child Protection Senior Officials' Group (CPSOG), developed an action plan that builds on the work taken forward to date by the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) to create a system wide response to child exploitation.

A professional officer was appointed to the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to lead on the co-ordination and delivery of the CCE action plan, including the development of professional guidance, service pathways, and risk assessment tools, among other things. Agreed actions in both the CCE action plan and under the three-year MSHT Strategy seek to increase awareness and use of the NRM in relation to CCE. DoJ, alongside the Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC) are working to commission research to investigate barriers to the identification of modern slavery and human trafficking among children in Northern Ireland, with a focus on CCE.

RESULTS

In 2023/24, MSHTU detectives were able to safeguard 53 adults after conducting five searches, resulting in ten arrests. Six people were charged with MSHT-related offences, and a further eight reported.

CASE STUDY

JOINT INVESTIGATION TEAM TACKLE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

During July 2023, detectives from MSHTU, carried out a significant operation into an OCG. The operation, conducted jointly with Romanian authorities, focused on the activities of an OCG suspected of trafficking young Romanian women throughout Northern Ireland for the purpose of sexual exploitation. PSNI officers carried out searches and arrested three people in the Greater Belfast and Newtownabbey area. Two men, aged 29 and 36, and a woman, aged 35, were arrested on suspicion of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, controlling prostitution for gain, brothel keeping and money laundering. All three were later charged to appear at Laganside Magistrates Court.

It is suspected that this crime group enticed young women to travel to Northern Ireland from Romania, with the false promise of lawful employment in a commercial setting. Upon arrival, they were forced into prostitution and exploited. So far, six victims have been identified, some of whom are engaging with police and receiving support. The victims linked to this investigation, who all come from the same area in Romania, had previously experienced some form of hardship, such as adverse childhood experiences and physical abuse.

In order to tackle this criminality, MSHTU and colleagues from the Romanian authorities formed a Joint Investigation Team, facilitated and supported by Eurojust.



PSNI officers conducting search

FORWARD LOOK

The Justice Minister launched a new three-year Strategy to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland, the first MSHT Strategy published to cover a period of three years from 2024-27. The Strategy sets out new commitments/actions to strengthen the response of the Department and partners to existing issues and emerging threats, while building on the successes of previous strategies. Some key commitments/actions include;

- the introduction of Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders in Northern Ireland;
- the commencement of Duty to Notify provisions already included in the 2015 Act;
- enhanced multi-sector collaboration; and
- campaigning to raise public awareness of MSHT issues in Northern Ireland.

Monitoring progress of commitments/actions

In delivering the Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking Strategy 2024-27, Department of Justice and partners have committed to providing regular progress updates through the OCTF MSHT Sub Group and NGO Engagement Forum, with published progress reports on an annual basis for the lifetime of the Strategy.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking is on the increase in Northern Ireland and everybody can play a part in addressing this ruthless crime.

Anybody can be a victim of this type of crime – it is not just confined to foreign nationals. Adults and children can be trafficked or enslaved and forced to sell their bodies for sex. People are also trafficked or enslaved for labour exploitation, for example:

- to work on a farm or factory
- to work in a house as a servant, maid or nanny
- to beg on the street

If you suspect that someone has been trafficked or enslaved:

- call 999 in an emergency
- call 101 about the general situation
- call 0800 0121 700 for the Modern Slavery Helpline

3.6 ORGANISED IMMIGRATION CRIME

THE THREAT

OCGs continue to exploit migrants trying to enter the UK illegally. People smuggling, unlike human trafficking, does not involve an element of coercion. The migrant is complicit and has usually paid a significant amount of money for the 'service'. Facilitators will often assist in arranging illegal entry as well as assisting those already here illegally to remain. Whilst those being smuggled are complicit, they are also often vulnerable. Many will have been living in a country involved in conflict and/or be impoverished. They may believe that coming to the UK will provide a better life for themselves and their families. Facilitators will assist in illegal entry by providing false documents, the arranging of so-called 'sham' marriages (or 'marriages of convenience') and organising transport. Less commonly, illegal migrants will pay to enter another country clandestinely, for example hidden within a lorry or in a shipping container. This type of entry is particularly dangerous for the migrant and there have been well documented cases of deaths.

Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) involves an OCG assisting a person to cross borders without legal permission or documentation. OIC assistance includes providing people with logistical assistance and modes to allow border crossings. Illegal methods of crossing the UK border include the use of small boats to cross the English Channel, clandestine entry via vehicles and/or facilitation of travel on air routes.

OCGs also help migrants to fraudulently obtain entry clearance through 'leave to enter' or 'leave to remain' in the UK under various visa or settlement schemes. Opportunities offered by the online environment and social media platforms are exploited at all stages of organised immigration crime, including advertising of illicit services (primarily smuggling and the supply of false documents), recruitment of potential migrants, and communication with the migrants on their journey or amongst other crime group members. Social media and messaging are also used to share travel guidance and give advice on how to frustrate law enforcement activity.

Common Travel Area Abuse and Organised Immigration Crime

Irregular migrants continue to abuse the Common Travel Area (CTA) via a variety of means to enter the UK from Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Detections of this abuse increased during the first quarter of 2024 to 505 encounters compared to 435 in the previous quarter. The most significant increase in encounters during this period was at Belfast International Airport, with 148 interactions compared to 119 in the previous period. The airport also continued to be the most abused CTA port overall accounting for 29% of all detections, with the most common nationalities encountered at the port being Iranian, Afghan and Albanian. It is highly likely that this can be attributed to increased activity by law enforcement. It is almost certain that the greatest level of CTA abuse for immigration purposes occurs by individuals crossing the land border. 71% of the 505 encounters were on a Northern Ireland to GB route.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

OCTF partner agencies manage ongoing investigations and conduct operations against OCGs suspected of involvement in this type of organised crime. Agencies also engage in awareness campaigns to help members of the community identify those at risk, and to warn those involved of the dangers.



RESULTS

CASE STUDY

ARMAGH MAN JAILED FOR HIS PART IN SMUGGLING 39 VIETNAMESE NATIONALS

In November 2023, an Armagh man was jailed for his involvement in a people-smuggling network linked to the deaths of 39 Vietnamese nationals in Essex in October 2019. The victims and their families had paid significant sums of money to an OCG that promised safe passage and a better life in the UK. This conviction formed part of a wider investigation into an OCG involved in immigration offences, and this conviction brought the total number of people convicted to eleven. PSNI assisted other agencies to piece together the sequence of events that led up to the deaths and to identify other OCG members and their links to other criminality.

CASE STUDY

ALBANIAN FACILITATION

In March 2024 an investigation into a potential Albanian facilitator resulted in intelligence indicating that the target had driven a van travelling outbound from Holyhead to Dublin with no passengers and may be returning to GB via Belfast later the same day with more than one person on board. The intelligence was shared with officers and the vehicle was identified in the car lanes at Belfast Seaport; inside was the driver and one passenger. The passenger initially showed a photograph on his phone of a Bulgarian passport but was identified as an Albanian male with no leave to enter or remain in the UK, he was detained and served with illegal entry papers. The driver was arrested for facilitation and the case adopted by investigating officers.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You have the information we need to improve the intelligence picture, report it to www.gov.uk/report-immigration-crime

3.7 BORDER CRIME

THE THREAT

The UK border is a primary defence against a range of threats, but it also has several vulnerabilities that are known to, and targeted by, those who seek to undermine the controls in place, for either criminal gain, illegal migration or terrorist activity. OCGs attempt to use every means possible to exploit border vulnerabilities. They actively seek gaps at ports, airports and transportation services and facilitate crime across borders. The opportunities available to OCGs to abuse the CTA increased from January 2021 with the introduction of new and additional ferry crossings between Republic of Ireland and mainland Europe. Law enforcement and partner agencies in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland work together closely to identify and tackle the emerging threats linked to these routes.

Cash

There has been no change in the threat level of cash smuggling to and from Northern Ireland since last year. There has been a decrease in individual cash detections when compared to last quarter, but a slight increase in the overall amount of cash detected. Detections were made from individuals across a range of nationalities, with a slight dominance noted from British and Irish nationals. Sterling was the most detected currency, followed by US Dollars and euros (although euro detections are below what has historically been reported).

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Border Force continues to work with other law enforcement departments to understand the implications of the Windsor Framework on serious and organised crime and how organised crime groups may adapt to vulnerabilities exposed by it.

Frontline Border Force staff are provided with training in identifying potential victims of modern slavery, and guidance issued to staff sets out indicators of modern slavery, including forced labour. In addition, Border Force also has a network of specially trained Safeguarding and Modern Slavery (SAMS) teams who receive classroom training focussing on the knowledge and skills needed for this area.

RESULTS

Border Force seizures (drugs recorded in the Drugs Section of the Report):

CASE STUDY

CIGARETTES CONCEALED WITHIN STUFFED TOYS

Smugglers will use various concealment methods to hide their goods. One example is using a stuffed teddy to import cigarettes. This seizure was made at a postal depot after a toy was imported from China.



CASE STUDY

CASH SEIZURE - £25,000

A parcel manifested as “leaflets” was examined which was being exported to Spain. Upon examination, some of the “leaflets” contained large amounts of cash (£25,000); this was seized under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and the NCA adopted the seizure for further investigation.



CASE STUDY

**LARGE TOBACCO SEIZURE –
870 KG OF TOBACCO SEIZED**

A container that had arrived from Germany via Rotterdam was searched and the goods were manifested as “worn tyres”. A search revealed packets of Hand Rolling Tobacco (HRT), with Luxemburg markings, concealed within tyres at the rear of the container. HMRC adopted the seizure for further investigation.



CASE STUDY

**LARGE CIGARETTE SEIZURE –
OVER 10 MILLION CIGARETTES
SEIZED**

Border Force seized 10.8 million cigarettes from a 45ft container that arrived from Sri Lanka via Rotterdam. The Lambert & Butler branded cigarettes were suspected to be counterfeit as all the bar codes were the same. The load was manifested as “textiles” and was destined for an address in Armagh. HMRC adopted the seizure for further investigation.

FORWARD LOOK

Border Force will continue to engage with law enforcement partners and conduct planned and reactive operational activity utilising the assets and capabilities to frustrate organised crime.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you have any information regarding the smuggling of goods or people, please contact:

- Call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org
- Customs hotline on 0800 595000

CASE STUDY

COUNTERFEIT GOODS

Border Force continue to detect counterfeit goods. The majority of seizures are found at parcel depots and include counterfeit phones, perfumes, sportswear, trainers and watches. Imports generally arrive from China, Hong Kong and Turkey.



3.8 EXCISE EVASION AND TAX FRAUD

THE THREAT

OCGs operating between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland are quick to adapt to changes in prices and duty rates. There are around 300 border crossing points between the two jurisdictions and none have active border check points, due to the existence of the Common Travel Area (CTA) and the Northern Ireland Protocol. The CTA allows freedom of movement between the UK and Ireland, along with the right to access social benefits, healthcare and social housing support. Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Protocol allows free movement of goods between UK and Ireland, and vice versa. OCGs are quick to adapt to new regulations and continue to either take advantage of the border, or to completely ignore it; whichever is most advantageous to them.

Tobacco Threat

The latest published UK tax gap figures estimate the loss to the Treasury from illicit tobacco at £2.5 billion.

Despite overall cigarette consumption declining, the illicit tobacco trade continues to be an issue. The smuggling of counterfeit cigarettes was assessed as the largest threat within tobacco fraud in the UK, followed closely by the smuggling of “cheap white” cigarettes with an increased supply from Poland and Romania. The biggest supply comes from Eastern Europe via Ro-Ro traffic as well as United Arab Emirates (UAE) produced product via container and deep-sea shipping.

“Cheap white” cigarettes manufactured in Eastern Europe and the Far East continue to be the primary source of illicit tobacco products smuggled into the UK and Republic of Ireland. OCGs are using ferry routes from Continental Europe to Republic of Ireland to smuggle illicit tobacco, before transporting the goods into Northern Ireland via the land border and then onto mainland UK via ferry, to circumvent EU Exit issues.

UK inland tobacco production and the smuggling of genuine Non-UK Duty Paid (NUKDP) tobacco products also continue to pose a severe threat. As the UK and Republic of Ireland are among the highest retail prices for tobacco products in Europe, the volume of counterfeit production targeting the UK and Republic of Ireland remains high. It is suspected that OCGs continue to operate manufacturing facilities for illicit tobacco products on the island of Ireland.

Responding to the Tobacco Threat

HMRC works closely with partner agencies to disrupt the illicit tobacco trade at retail level through visits to commercial premises to verify the legitimacy of tobacco products being sold. To increase compliance, a range of sanctions and penalties are used to penalise individuals handling illicit tobacco products and recovering the unpaid duty on seizures at these premises. HMRC continues to target those involved in the supply and distribution of illicit cigarettes through inspections, arrests, criminal investigations and prosecutions.

RESULTS

TOBACCO CASE STUDIES

OPERATION ROCK

In April 2023, PSNI officers stopped a vehicle in the Magherafelt area; a search by HMRC officers led to the seizure of 3,872 cigarettes, 125 Kg of HRT and £6,600 in cash; the driver of the vehicle was arrested. A subsequent search in the Coalisland area of premises linked to the driver led to the seizure of more than 3.7 million cigarettes, 180,575 Kg of HRT and 8.4 litres of alcohol. The estimated duty and VAT evaded is £2 million. A prosecution file has been submitted to the PPS seeking prosecution against one individual in relation to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty, VAT and related money laundering offences.



Seized cigarettes

CASE STUDY

OPERATION BALLARD

In June 2023, HMRC officers, accompanied by Border Force officers, inspected a 40ft container at Belfast Port which was said to contain 1800 cartons of garments from Sri Lanka. When the boxes were unloaded and opened they were found to contain counterfeit Lambert & Butler Original Silver cigarettes. Almost 11 million cigarettes were seized with an excise duty evasion of approximately £4.3 million. A prosecution file has been submitted to the PPS seeking prosecution against one individual for taking preparatory steps with a view to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty and related fraud offences.



Seized counterfeit Lambert & Butler Original Silver cigarettes

CASE STUDY

OPERATION HARRIS

In October 2023, HMRC officers, along with PSNI officers, conducted a search of three premises in the Newry Area. Two vans were found to contain a significant amount of non-UK duty paid tobacco products. One individual was arrested and almost 500,000 non-UK duty paid cigarettes, 25 Kg of HRT and a large quantity of cash in various currencies (including £28,215 and €36,430) were seized. The estimated duty evaded is approximately £255,766. The same individual was arrested again in November 2023 as a search of his vehicle by the PSNI led to the discovery of a concealment of £26,215 within the boot of the vehicle. Investigations are ongoing with a view to prosecution.



Seized cash



Seized cigarettes

FUEL THREAT

Fuel laundering remains the main organised crime risk for oils in Northern Ireland. Criminals use illegally manufactured equipment to attempt to remove the government markers from rebated fuel and subsequently supply the resulting product as diesel. Although it is believed the capability to launder by distillation, in a bid to remove the Accutrace S10 marker, is limited to a small number of individual groups, the dumping of laundering waste (known as sludge dumps) in both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland indicates that the laundering activity continues to take place mainly in the border area.

Driven by price differentials between North and South, as well as any currency fluctuations, the other main threat is fuel smuggling which remains lucrative in commercial quantities.

OCGs involved in fuel laundering often work at a cross border level; it is not unusual to discover a laundering site in one jurisdiction and associated waste product in the other. Similarly, rebated Northern Irish 'red' diesel laundering plants and waste sites have been found on both sides of the border, as have rebated Irish 'green' diesel laundering plants and waste sites.

The laundering process produces a toxic by-product that is usually dumped, often in rural locations. The subsequent environmental damage can be devastating as the sludge contaminates the ground and nearby waterways. It is not unusual for OCGs to dump by-product miles away from where the laundering took place, in a bid to lead law enforcement agencies away from the laundering site. Where OCGs are involved in large-scale laundering, waste is often dumped in intermediate bulk containers (IBCs) that are left on waste ground, in lay-bys, and at the side of roads on both sides of the border.

Responding to the Fuel Threat

HMRC's comprehensive anti-fraud oils strategy targets both laundering and fuel smuggling. This includes routine and intelligence led interventions throughout the fuel supply chain including inspections at oil suppliers, retail sites and of bulk storage at commercial users' sites. These checks are designed

not only to verify the integrity of the fuel but also to educate those involved in the supply chain, particularly Registered Dealers in Controlled Oil (RDCO's) of their obligations during supply.

In April 2022, changes in the entitlement to use red diesel were introduced which restricted the amount of red diesel in circulation. HMRC has worked alongside trade bodies such as the Northern Ireland Oils Federation and RDCOs to ensure that the supply of rebated fuel is restricted to those entitled to receive it, restricting the volume available to those intent on putting red diesel to illegal use.

RESULTS

FUEL CASE STUDY

JOINT INVESTIGATION OF A SITE IN NEWTOWNHAMILTON

In June 2023, PSNI and HMRC officers, involved in a joint investigation, conducted a joint agency search of a site in the Newtownhamilton area and discovered a substantial and established diesel laundering plant and seized several tons of toxic waste (by-product) stored in bulk containers, one tonne of bleaching earth and 11,000 litres of laundered fuel, illegal alcohol and fireworks and one man was arrested. HMRC conducted calculations and this plant had a lost revenue value of £18 million to the UK taxpayer. Specialist lifting equipment was brought in to dismantle this plant which is the largest fuel laundering plant uncovered in South Armagh for several years and the loss of revenue is substantial.



Fuel laundering site

FUEL CASE STUDY

OPERATION DILATE

In May 2023, HMRC officers from the Mobile Enforcement Team (MET) visited premises in the Newry area under Regulations 47 and 48 of the Hydrocarbon Oils Regulations 1973. During an inspection of the yard, officers uncovered an illegal fuel laundering plant, what appeared to be a small fuel laundering distillation plant and other apparatus used in the fuel laundering process. These items were seized along with four vehicles running on illicit fuel. At the rear of the property, officers found a 20ft container which contained almost 500,000 mixed brand illicit cigarettes, empty Smirnoff bottles, rolls of front and back Smirnoff bottle labels, bottle necks and caps, flat packed boxes labelled Smirnoff and bottling equipment - these items were also seized. The estimated Revenue Loss Prevented (RLP) in relation to fuel is approximately £1.7 million. The estimated RLP in relation to tobacco and alcohol is £278,290. A prosecution file has been submitted to the PPS seeking prosecution against three individuals.

This operation was also supported by An Garda Síochána, and highlights the multi commodity activity often associated with OCGs.



PSNI /HMRC joint operation in Newry area

FUEL CASE STUDY

OPERATION DACTYL

In November 2023, HMRC Mobile Enforcement Team (MET) officers observed an unmarked tanker at premises in the Newry area. MET officers entered these premises under Regulation 47 of the Hydrocarbon Oil Regulations (HOR) 1973 and observed a second tanker. Samples were taken from the running tanks in both vehicles and tested positive for laundered fuel. On inspection of the premises, a forecourt Marked Gas Oil (MGO) pump connected to a large storage tank and a wall mounted kerosene pump connected to a large storage tank were identified. Both tanks had a capacity of 30,000 litres. A third tank was discovered to be connected to the Marked Gas Oil tank by a pipe and contained laundered red diesel. The owner of the premises did not have an RDCO license to enable him to have controlled oil on site for sale. Due to this and then the presence of laundered fuel the following items were seized - 2 tankers, 3 tanks, associated pumps and filters, 13,319 litres of marked gas oil and 2,505 litres of fuel. The estimated excise duty evaded is approximately £3 million. Investigations are ongoing with a view to prosecutions.



FUEL CASE STUDY

FUEL LAUNDERING SITE IN NEWRY

In March 2024, a search of premises in the Newry by HMRC MET officers in conjunction with PSNI resulted in the seizure of a number of commercial vehicles, two large metal storage tanks with a combined capacity of over 90,000 litres, filters, 3.5 tonnes of bleaching earth, 40ft trailer and a trailer full of suspected waste sludge from the laundering process. It is believed that the tanks were being converted for use as individual laundering plants. The commercial vehicles were all detected with Marked Gas Oil (MGO) and although it is suspected the fuel being laundered was red MGO, a small amount of green diesel was detected in one of the storage pots. 19 tonnes of waste sludge in cubes were detected in another trailer which if related to the plant would suggest approximately 1.3 million litres of fuel had been laundered with an estimated revenue loss of approximately £700,000. The cumulative RLP is estimated at over £20 million and investigations are ongoing.



large storage tanks containing waste sludge

FORWARD LOOK - FUEL

Changes are being made to the Hydrocarbon Oil (Designated Markers) Regulations 1996 and the Hydrocarbon Oil (Marking) Regulations 2002, which set out the requirements to mark rebated fuel. From 18 January 2024, a new marker 'n-butyl phenyl ether must be added to any fuel being marked as a condition of allowing the rebate. The addition of this new marker will enhance the existing marking regime, ensure the risks posed by fuel laundering continue to be mitigated to the greatest extent possible,

and maintain alignment with the fuel marking requirements in other jurisdictions, particularly Ireland, which will support ongoing efforts to tackle fuel fraud.

As fuel fraud is an all-island crime, HMRC continues to collaborate with the Irish Revenue Commissioners and An Garda Síochána as well as working with the PSNI and NIEA to ensure that intelligence streams are maximised.

ALCOHOL THREAT

Alcohol frauds involve the importing of alcohol into the UK without paying the required import duty. Alcohol fraud carried out by OCGs is a serious problem. The UK tax gap for alcohol fraud (both duty and VAT) is currently £1.2 billion.

For those seeking to utilise Ireland as a gateway for illicit alcohol supplies, the threat continues to evolve. Changes in UK legislation, designed to facilitate trade and the movement of goods since EU Exit, work to the advantage and disadvantage of all. The most significant risk currently involves the use of legitimate haulage and freight forwarding agents to move illicit product into GB and via Northern Ireland ports. There has been a noted increase in traffic on the island of Ireland by OCGs seeking to utilise Ireland as a gateway for illicit alcohol supplies demonstrating intent and capability to exploit Northern Ireland for facilitating illicit alcohol trade.

UK Transit Diversion has historically been a favoured modus operandi (MO) used by OCGs. Fraud occurs when duty suspended (no duty owed until sold for retail) alcohol travelling from mainland Europe (EU) to its destination country of Republic of Ireland via the UK, is diverted en route to an OCG-controlled location (wholesale and retail supply chains). UK Transit Diversion Fraud is committed through 'mirror loads'. This is where duplicate copies of the transit documents are given to multiple lorries. These documents are re-used if not intercepted at UK borders, to allow the 'mirror' loads to be diverted to OCG-controlled locations within the UK during the life of the transit documentation.

Another MO used, which has become more prevalent in the last couple of years is smuggling, where there is no attempt to provide alcohol movement documentation. Other less significant modes of fraud are UK Import Fraud, where, unlike UK Transit Diversion, the goods are destined for the UK but have been mis-described or undeclared ABV strengths and counterfeiting.

Responding to the Alcohol Threat

Alcohol fraud is tackled by addressing policy regulating the movement of alcohol and the monitoring and interception of perceived risk movements, as well as with working with trade sectors to improve their knowledge with the aim to identify and counter fraudulent activity across their trades.

RESULTS

ALCOHOL CASE STUDY

ALCOHOL SMUGGLING

In September 2023, a search of a commercial yard in the Moy area, by HMRC officers, resulted in the seizure of seven 40ft trailers all containing foreign branded beer without the relevant paperwork. In total, 183,652 litres of foreign branded beers were seized with an estimated duty evaded of £355,282.

Between August 2023 and March 2024, HMRC officers have intercepted the movement of illicit alcohol from Northern Ireland to the UK mainland on five occasions. It is believed that the alcohol is entering Northern Ireland from Europe via Republic of Ireland. Three of these were interventions at either Belfast or Larne Port with the loads due to travel on the ferry to the UK mainland and the other two were inland interventions at storage locations. In total, five tractor units, six trailers, 48,603 litres of wine and 49,536 litres of beer have been seized. The estimated duty evaded is £266,885.



Beer seized in searches

ALCOHOL FORWARD LOOK

HMRC have a new Alcohol Tactical Priority for 2024/2025 which includes intensification deployments at UK ports. The objective is to tackle the flow of illicit alcohol into the UK via West Coast Ports including, but not limited to, traffic via the island of Ireland.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you have concerns or suspicions,
call HRMC HOTLINE on 0800 788 887

3.9 NATIONAL SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME

THE THREAT

Serious and organised crime (SOC) continues to have a corrosive impact on the daily lives of individuals, communities, businesses, public services and infrastructure. The NCA continues to lead the UK mission to protect the public from SOC by degrading the most harmful OCGs and leading the wider law enforcement system to reduce the threat.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

The NCA works closely with PSNI in areas including criminal investigations into paramilitary-related serious and organised crime, the use of civil recovery powers against such criminals, abuse of the Common Travel Area (CTA), the pursuit of Northern Irish fugitives overseas and the provision of a range of major crime investigative support and specialist capabilities.

The NCA Director General (Operations) is the strategic lead for the NCA's relationships with partners in Northern Ireland and remains committed to ensuring that any activity is compatible with relevant legislation in Northern Ireland.

The NCA continues to play an active role in the OCTF, as well as the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) and the Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) on cross border matters.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

MONEY LAUNDERING – FIRST UWO GRANTED

In September 2023, a hearing took place in Northern Ireland to consider an NCA application for an Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO). This was the first application of its type since the introduction of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 which came into force in Northern Ireland in 2021. NCA officers in the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) obtained a UWO to seize a holiday home, which was thought to have been purchased with the proceeds of fraud and money laundering and owned by a person whose family are believed to be senior members of South East Antrim UDA. This is part of a civil recovery investigation under the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA).



Seized holiday home

CASE STUDY

DRUGS – SOUTH EAST ANTRIM UDA SUSPECTS ARRESTED

In November 2023, a Paramilitary Crime Task Force (PCTF) investigation into the supply of controlled drugs by South East Antrim UDA resulted in five suspects being arrested and charged with Conspiracy to Supply Class A Drugs. A further suspect has been charged with Possession with Intent to Supply Class A and B drugs.

CASE STUDY

FRAUD – PROPERTY FREEZING ORDER GRANTED

In June 2023, NCA officers in the PCTF successfully applied for a Property Freezing Order at Belfast High Court as part of an ongoing investigation. The property was believed to be purchased with the proceeds of fraud and money laundering offences.

Working closely with the Joint Agency Task Force (JATF), NCA was granted a Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) recovery order in February 2024 for a plot of land in County Armagh. The land has been subject to a Property Freezing Order by the NCA since 2023 and is alleged to have been purchased using proceeds of fraud and money laundering.

CASE STUDY

MODERN SLAVERY AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING (MSHT) – INVESTIGATION INTO ROMANIAN OCG

In the summer of 2023 the MSHT Tactical Advisor Team provided support to PSNI's Operation INSOL, a MHSTU investigation into a Romanian OCG alleged to have been trafficking females from Romania to Belfast for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Three people were arrested on suspicion of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, controlling prostitution for gain, brothel keeping and money laundering. Six victims were identified and safeguarded.

FORWARD LOOK

The NCA's approach to protecting the public in Northern Ireland from Serious Organised Crime (SOC) is twofold:

- To take action outside of Northern Ireland, upstream (of senior criminals and their enablers), overseas (in Europe and wider), and online to best protect the public from SOC before it impacts and harms communities here, utilising niche organisational capabilities. These capabilities, such as major investigations, the NCA International Liaison Officer network, its corporate relationship with social media companies and industry, or enhanced cyber capabilities, are system capabilities established to support wider UK law enforcement partners.
- To continue to work collaboratively with the PSNI and the PPS to take action in Northern Ireland to protect communities from SOC, pulling through niche NCA capabilities to support frontline use in Northern Ireland.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Report crimes or suspicious activity to:

- PSNI Telephone 101
- Via the PSNI website
www.psnipolice.uk/makeareport
- Call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org

If a child has been a victim of sexual abuse online or you are worried this is happening to a child you know, report it safely and securely via the Online reporting portal at www.ceop.police.uk

For general online safety advice please visit www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Beware of fraud – Verifying a NCA officer

If someone has contacted you claiming to be an NCA officer and you are in any doubt as to their identity, you can verify their identity by calling:

- NCA Control Centre Tel 0370 496 7622
- Action Fraud on Tel 0300 123 2040

An NCA officer will NEVER:

- Ask for remote access to your computer via phone, email or online
- Ask you to verify your personal details such as passwords, account numbers or card details via phone, email or online.
- Ask you to transfer or hand over money via phone, email or online.
- Speak or act in a threatening manner.

3.10 ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

THE THREAT

Environmental crime, in particular waste crime, is becoming an increasingly attractive criminal activity given the potential for high financial gains. Whilst the damage caused by this criminality is not always visible or immediately obvious, it continues to have significant detrimental effect on Northern Ireland's environment, economy and the people who live and work here. Decomposition of illegally dumped waste has the potential to contaminate ground water and soil which can adversely impact biodiversity, cause disease and contaminate food supplies.

As with many other criminal activities, waste criminality is driven by opportunity and financial gain. This can be through large-scale fraud and tax evasion such as the use of fraudulently obtained waste management authorisations to collect, treat and dispose of waste; the avoidance of landfill tax applied at legally operated landfills; the illegal transportation and covert movement of illicit commodities in and out of the jurisdiction.

The illegal movement and disposal of waste offers a lucrative opportunity to some OCGs. This activity is often cross border, with waste moved from one jurisdiction and dumped in another, avoiding the associated landfill taxes. Complicit waste companies and haulage companies/drivers assist in this criminality and it is not unusual for those involved to also be involved in the movement of other illicit items. In some instances, the illicit waste is mis-described or hidden within legitimate loads.

In Northern Ireland, OCGs involved in fuel laundering are also necessarily involved in environmental crime because the laundering process results in a toxic by-product that needs to be dumped in an attempt to hide the illicit activity. Waste is often dumped in intermediate bulk containers (IBCs), which frequently leak, resulting in the toxic waste leaching into the ground and/or waterways.

These OCGs often work cross border, with waste usually dumped some distance away from the laundering site in an attempt to evade detection. The NIEA is the lead agency in respect of waste offenders and are responsible for the clean-up costs.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

The Environmental Crime Unit (ECU) of NIEA lead the way in identifying and responding to the most persistent and serious environmental crimes through the prevention, investigation and prosecution of waste crime by using evidence-based investigations to enforce relevant legislation and, where necessary, bringing offenders to justice.

In line with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Enforcement Policy, ECU take enforcement action against anyone suspected of breaching environmental legislation such as the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 (As amended). Enforcement action will always be proportionate to the levels of harms caused, the type and means of offending, the impact on communities and the level of financial benefit arising from the criminality.

During the reporting period, 576 reports of environmental crime were allocated to ECU and 403 site visits occurred. On 84 occasions ECU provided advice and guidance around legislative responsibilities and departmental requirements regarding the management of waste and 46 formal warnings were issued. In total ECU issued 10 fixed penalty notices, opened 48 enforcement files and secured 10 successful criminal convictions resulting in fines and four suspended sentences.

In order to maximise impact in line with the 'Polluter Pays' principle the operational branch of ECU is supported by Accredited Financial Investigators. ECU's financial investigators pursue Confiscation Orders (under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002) with the aim of depriving those convicted of the monies generated from their environmental crimes. The instigation and progression of POCA proceedings can encourage offenders to remediate the waste eliminating any benefit and in doing so assists in the prevention of future harm.

NIEA's participation in the OCTF provides opportunities to foster and develop close working relationships with other law enforcement agencies and allows collaborative, multi-agency community working together to target those who seek to benefit from environmental crime. NIEA also works with law enforcement partners in the Republic of Ireland, GB and further afield.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

UNLAWFUL DISPOSAL OF CONTROLLED WASTE

In August 2018 ECU officers attended a site in Mid Ulster suspected of having been infilled illegally with controlled waste. Attending officers identified an acrid smell in the air, evidence of burning and several large mounds of shredded waste material which included plastics, foam and rubber. There were no authorisations or licenses in place to permit the infilling of waste on this land.

Following a further warrant served on the owner of the land, the inspection showed it that the mounds observed in the first site visit were no longer above surface level. Officers then identified an area they believed to have been infilled and whilst covered with clay and soil, fragments of plastic and metal were visible on the surface. Machinery believed to have been used in the commission of environmental offences was seized during this inspection. Officers took samples from the site; one contained black fluid leaching from the suspected area of infill and one from a nearby stream. The examination of both identified the presence of noxious and polluting matter which could cause harm to nearby waterways.

A legislative notice to remediate the waste from the site was served on the landowner, however, the landowner failed to comply with this notice. As a result, a prosecution file was submitted to the PPS recommending the landowner be prosecuted for eight separate offences under the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997.

Subsequently a full intrusive survey, under warrant, of the site was carried out by ECU officers in October 2019. This confirmed that the area infilled with waste contained over 3700 tonnes of controlled waste. Two further samples obtained provided evidence of the presence of poisonous, noxious and polluting matter. Two solid matter samples were taken which confirmed that the waste was non-inert and should only be disposed of in landfill sites authorised to take this waste.

Parallel to the criminal investigation, ECU officers conducted a financial investigation under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA). This investigation traced and restrained significant assets connected to the defendant so they would be made available for any future Confiscation Order the Court may wish to award.

As a result of the investigative work conducted by ECU officers the landowner subsequently pleaded guilty to five waste charges under The Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 for which he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment, suspended for three years. Following sentencing confiscation proceedings under POCA were instigated in the Crown Court which are currently nearing completion.



Illegally dumped controlled waste



Illegally dumped waste contained noxious material

CASE STUDY**WASTE BURIED IN DERRY CITY AREA**

In September 2023, officers from a PSNI Neighbourhood Policing Team detected a landfill site in the Derry City area with more than 30,000 tonnes of waste buried. This included large amounts of toxic waste and products not suitable for landfill.

This methodology is used by organised criminals to dispose of waste often from Republic of Ireland in a manner that avoids relevant taxes. DAERA is investigating the matter.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The NIEA needs the assistance of the public.

If you have any information which would help with the detection and prevention of environmental waste crime, this can be reported to the NIEA's incident hotline on 0800 807 060.

Alternatively you can contact the NIEA's Enforcement Branch by email at environmentalcrime@daera-ni.gov.uk or on 028 90569453.

You may also report environmental crime through CrimeStoppers, 0800 555 111 or online at www.crimestoppers-uk.org.

FORWARD LOOK

The landscape of environmental crime is constantly changing and evolving with more sophisticated and integral methods being employed by criminals to avoid detection, regulation and enforcement. The NIEA sees evidence of criminals adapting practices and seeking new ways of penetrating the legitimate waste management industry for illegal profit and gains. Not only does this lead to increased risks of harm to the environment and public health but also presents a threat to legitimate business, causing untold economic harm. In order to meet the challenges that this evolution presents, NIEA is striving to identify fresh opportunities to improve its operational and strategic responses; increase capacity to respond effectively, create new channels for joint working and build and strengthen the partnerships that currently exist, both here and with colleagues in other jurisdictions.

NIEA's continued presence within OCTF presents opportunities for the Agency to take part in valuable data sharing opportunities and avail of the expertise and resources of much larger organisations.

NIEA's objective moving forward is to increase its ability to tackle serious and organised environmental crime by developing an understanding of OCGs and crime types to ensure resources are deployed in order to have the highest impact and by developing partnership working to deliver disruption and enforcement interventions.

3.11 ORGANISED CRIME AGAINST THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

THE THREAT

The Department for Communities (DfC) administers an annual benefit expenditure of £8.4 billion and while the vast majority of these payments are correct, a small percentage are subject to fraud and error, leading to benefit over and underpayments for customers and putting pressure on the public purse. The Department's Benefit Security Division (BSD) takes the lead in driving activity to minimise fraud and error. The Organised Fraud Unit (OFU) within BSD is responsible for undertaking investigations into allegations of potential organised criminality against the benefit and National Insurance Number (NINO) systems.

After an encouraging fall in losses, due to customer fraud and error in 2022/23, the figure has once again risen in 2023/24 to £214 million, or 2.6% of expenditure. Within this result, Universal Credit (UC) remains the highest risk although there have also been increases in customer fraud and error across a number of legacy benefits reflecting the greater propensity for fraud in society generally as noted by the Government's Public Sector Fraud Authority.

Most UC claimants will self-serve online providing opportunities to make the journey easier for claimants but also providing opportunities for prospective fraudsters. The Department continues to refine processes to strike a balance between accessibility and system security.

Identity Fraud cases account for a sizeable portion of the OFU's referrals. Many of these involve a hijacked or false identity and are linked to cyber-related and web-enabled attacks on the benefit system. These cases often have elements of wider criminality, highlighting the importance of strong working relationships with other government departments and external law enforcement agencies, both in the UK and Republic of Ireland. OFU is keen to build further on such relationships.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Throughout 2023/24, OFU's focus continues with the investigation of serious and complex fraud allegations including;

- examination of false medical reports and documents provided as evidence to Personal Independence Payment (PIP);
- issuing intelligence reports to other law enforcement agencies to help detect and prevent criminality;
- multi-agency collaboration and investigations with partners aimed at disrupting criminals who seek to exploit the NINO Gateway and the social security system through hijacked identities, counterfeit documents, and identity fraud; and
- joint collaboration with partner law enforcement organisations to identify individuals in receipt of benefit under an assumed identity, or those who have circumvented the NINO Gateway with a false identity to avoid prosecution or deportation.

RESULTS

Financial Investigation Unit 2023/24

During 2023/24, the Department's Financial Investigation Unit (FIU) secured Confiscation Orders to the value of £98,000 and received voluntary payments amounting to £91,000.

CASE STUDY

CONFISCATION ORDER GRANTED

The FIU obtained a Confiscation Order for £31,219 against a woman who failed to declare that she was living with her partner whilst claiming means-tested benefit. The woman claimed Income Support on the basis she was a single person, however, an investigation completed by the Department established that she was living with her partner who was in full-time employment.

CASE STUDY

JOINT WORKING SUCCESS

An allegation was received indicating a male claiming benefits in Belfast was living in the Republic of Ireland. Checks revealed that DfC benefits were being paid comprising of Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit and Personal Independence Payment.

Working alongside Department of Social Protection partners, evidence was obtained linking the claimant to County Tipperary. Pandemic Unemployment Benefit had been paid in Republic of Ireland during the pandemic and self-employed earnings were being reported to Irish Tax and Customs.

OFU investigators carried out an unnotified home visit to the Belfast address, although the property appeared unoccupied. A letter was left inviting the 58-year-old to an Interview Under Caution at a Belfast Jobs and Benefits Office, which he attended.

Evidence packs were sent to Benefit Decision Makers who raised overpayments on all benefits totalling over £110,000. The case was passed to the PPS who directed a prosecution should be brought. In December 2023 the defendant appeared in Court, pleading guilty to all five charges put to him. He returned to Craigavon Crown Court in February 2024 and was handed down a custodial sentence of nine months' imprisonment. The Judge acknowledged the money was not used to fund a lavish lifestyle but pointed out the amount of money was large and the fraud was maintained over a period of seven years. The Judge also indicated that if the defendant had not pleaded guilty, he would have faced a longer sentence.

FORWARD LOOK

OFU continues to tackle low-tech but highly organised attacks on the benefit system, which due to their nature can be resource intensive. The team also continue to identify ways to strengthen the systems and processes in place to prevent further attacks.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are three methods to report benefit fraud:

- 1) Report benefit fraud online:
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/report-benefit-fraud-online>
- 2) Benefit Fraud Hotline on 0800 9756 050
- 3) Write to:

Benefit Security Division
The Mail Opening Unit
Limavady JBO
9 Connell Street
Limavady,
BT49 4AN

3.12 PROSECUTION DECISIONS

PPS has a key role to play in prosecuting and disrupting the criminal activities of those involved in organised crime and to work with partners to bring organised criminals to justice.

RESULTS

Restraints:

13 Cases
Received

Confiscations:

14 Confiscation
Orders Granted

Totalling:

£1,813,000

Decisions issued for offences relating to the relevant offence group

(based on most serious decisions issued between 01/04/2023 and 31/03/2024)

Offence Group	Indictable Prosecution	Summary Prosecution	Diversion	No prosecution	Total
Drug Offences	1205	4241	759	929	7134
Drug offences -excluding simple possession	422	206	47	186	861
Controlling Prostitution	3	0	0	4	7
Human Trafficking	4	0	0	6	10
Money laundering	141	35	0	51	227

CASE STUDY

LIMAVADY WOMAN DEFRAUDED COMPANY OF MORE THAN £450K

A Confiscation Order was made for an available amount of £132,047 in December 2023 and paid in full.

CASE STUDY

PROSECUTION FOR DRUG OFFENCES AND MONEY LAUNDERING

A prosecution for drug offences and money laundering was made and Serious Crime Prevention Orders were granted and a Confiscation Order for the sum of £242,067 was made in January 2024.



**ORGANISED
CRIME**
TASK FORCE

ASSET RECOVERY SCHEMES

(ARIS AND ARCS)



CHAPTER 4: ASSET RECOVERY SCHEMES (ARIS AND ARCS)

One of the most common incentives to drive the activities of OCGs is the desire to make a profit and accumulate wealth. Law enforcement agencies respond to this by using asset recovery powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA). Under this legislation, the proceeds of crime can be recovered with criminal confiscation (this first requires a conviction) and using civil powers such as civil recovery, cash seizure and taxation powers. Removing profits that fund crime is a helpful disruption tool, breaking the cycle of criminal activity to prevent further offences occurring.

Seizing the ill-gotten gains from organised crime sends out a clear message that crime does not pay.

Criminal confiscation is the most commonly used power under POCA. Confiscation proceedings can be brought following a criminal conviction involving financial gain or the laundering of criminal assets. Any criminal financial gain will be calculated during proceedings and the Court may make a Confiscation Order. In Northern Ireland, money surrendered to the Courts under Confiscation Orders is allocated to the Northern Ireland Assets Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS).

WHAT HAPPENS WITH CONFISCATION ORDER PAYMENTS?

Payment against Northern Ireland Confiscation Orders are transferred to the Department of Justice. These funds are split 50-50 on an annual basis.

50% of the total Northern Ireland ARIS pot is shared between the agencies responsible for investigating, prosecuting and processing successful confiscation cases (see the table below) and is used to **invest in measures to support the further recovery of criminal assets and proceeds of crime to disrupt criminal activity and deprive criminals of their profits.**

50% is allocated to the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) to provide funding for projects often delivered in community settings, with the aim of **preventing crime or reducing the fear of crime.** ARCS funding is allocated under a grant application process managed by the Department of Justice.

The total value of criminal recovery receipts paid under Confiscation Orders during the 2023/24 financial year in Northern Ireland was more than £1.1 million.

ASSETS RECOVERY INCENTIVISATION SCHEME (ARIS)

The table below sets out the value of Confiscation Order receipts returned to each law enforcement agency, PPS and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS) under the ARIS scheme in 2023/24.

Agency	ARIS Payments 2023/24
Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	£165,308
HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC)	£16,253
Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA)	£56,825
Home Office – Immigration Enforcement	£0
National Crime Agency (NCA)	£0
Department for Communities (DfC)	£25,418
Security Industry Authority (SIA)	£159
Public Prosecution Service (PPS)	£263,963
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS)	£58,658
Total Paid	£586,584

During 2023/24, the agencies used their incentivisation allocations for a number of purposes including:

PSNI

In 2023/24 Police Service of Northern Ireland spent their ARIS returns on salaries for Police Service of Northern Ireland Financial Investigators, the maintenance cost of accreditation of Financial Investigators, and one Financial Investigator's course.

HMRC

For the financial year 2023/24, the HMRC UK's ARIS fund provided £14m of funding to 24 projects within HMRC. The fund invested in a range of projects to improve counter-fraud capabilities. These included the delivery of a new specialist counter-fraud capability-building team and pilots of new approaches to tackling fraud, along with digital tools to enhance our recovery and counter-fraud activity.

NIEA

Between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024 NIEA Environmental Crime Unit received £56,825 from the Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS). These monies were used to drive up asset recovery and fight crime through the funding of training, services and equipment detailed below:

- Financial analysis software and associated licensing;
- Criminal Investigation software;
- Criminal investigation training;
- NCA registration for Investigators;
- NCA Training courses;
- Property valuation work in support of major confiscation investigations.

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES (DfC)

2023/2024 ARIS returns were used to part-fund a Financial Intelligence Officer post within the Department's Financial Investigation Unit.

PUBLIC PROSECUTION SERVICE

ARIS receipts contributed to staffing and operational costs to support the conduct of prosecutions and restraint and confiscation proceedings in organised crime cases.

NORTHERN IRELAND COURTS AND TRIBUNAL SERVICE (NICTS)

The funding was used by NICTS to provide administrative support for NICTS and to support an independent Judiciary.

ASSETS RECOVERY COMMUNITY SCHEME (ARCS)

The Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) seeks to re-invest in projects to prevent crime and/or reduce the fear of crime. Projects supported through ARCS also benefit one or more of victims, communities and the environment. Removing profits that fund crime is an effective disruption tool by helping to break the cycle of criminal activity and prevent further offences occurring. Seizing the ill-gotten gains from organised crime sends out a clear message that crime does not pay.

The call for applications in August 2022 meant that applicants could seek financial support for projects to be delivered within a timeframe up to 31 March 2024 (six months in 2022/23 and 12 months in 2023/24). Projects were invited to apply for funding of up to £10,000 in 2022/23 and up to £25,000 in 2023/24.

Over 140 bids were received and assessed by a departmental assessment panel. Funding for 80+ projects was approved by the panel across the two financial years. The majority of successful projects were offered partial funding – and most were funded across the maximum period available. During this reporting period ARCS continued to fund a range of activities, including those working with young people to build skills and confidence; addressing anti-social behaviour and environmental crime; reducing re-offending; supporting victims of modern slavery, domestic abuse and hate crime; raising awareness of fraud, scams and organised crime as well as support for community safety initiatives.

Examples of some of the projects funded during 2023/24 are set out below, followed by a comprehensive list of all the projects funded during the period of this report.

PeacePlayers

PeacePlayers' Cross Community Interface League (CCL) project was allocated £6,500 in 2023/24.

The aim of the project is to target marginalised young people (male and female) by using the neutral sport of basketball to engage and upskill participants to deter them from offending and becoming involved in sectarianism and paramilitarism.

In the 2023/24 period, the project ran in 5 council areas - providing young people from different religious backgrounds, living in interface areas, with positive experiences of each other. During this time a total of 243 participants aged 9 -14 years engaged in playing and learning together on integrated teams. As well as playing basketball together on integrated teams, PeacePlayers facilitators helped participants explore and learn about issues such as sectarianism and prejudice. The project helps provide young people with the skills to use sport to build positive cross community relations.

In addition, 30 coaches and facilitators received training to equip them to use sport to promote good relations and to raise awareness and to address the causes and consequences of casual sectarianism. The feedback from participants showed that:

- 93% of participants said they felt positive toward people from a different religious background to their own.
- 95% of participants said they were open to making new friends from a different religious background to their own.
- 86% of participants said that they felt the programme helped increase their confidence to serve as leader in PeacePlayers, among their peers and in their communities.

PeacePlayers also hosted an event in Queens PEC to mark the Anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. The visitors to the event included the then Secretary of State Chris Heaton Harris, Tánaiste Michael Martin, US Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Joe Kennedy and Jane Hartley UK US Ambassador.

In addition, in November 2023 PeacePlayers was shortlisted for Sport Journalism, Sport for Change Award. PeacePlayers did not win, but having the organisation's work acknowledged in this way on a UK wide basis was a huge achievement.



Young people attending Peaceplayers project

Orchardville's Crime Prevention & Safety Project

During the reporting period Orchardville's Crime Prevention and Safety Project was allocated funding of £16,000.

This project aimed to deliver a comprehensive, accessible training programme to young people and adults with learning disability to educate and raise awareness about the various types of scams they may fall victim to. This has had a positive impact on the participants who are now more aware of scams and how to stay safe online. Over the duration of the project the target number of participants who attended training was exceeded, with 300 people taking part.

In addition, workshops were held with 80 Orchardville staff and 50 parents/carers to help them identify and report scams.

A pilot programme, regarding Relationships and Sex Education (in particular, consent and capacity) was also delivered. Questions arose regarding relationships and in particular what consent is. The training focused on the key areas where people with learning disabilities or autism are often more at risk of being a victim or perpetrator of crime. People with learning disabilities are less likely to be aware of the online offences which can be committed by sharing and distributing personal information or images and laws around inappropriate use of mobile technology and harassment. Their vulnerability in this area and their desire to have friends and relationships can often lead to them committing offences.

Scamwise Easy Read resources have been developed by Orchardville, Consumer Council and PSNI, which are very accessible for the target group.





Participants using the Scamwise Easy Read resource

Irish FA Foundation - Stay Onside Community Safety Project

The IFA Foundation's "Stay Onside" project delivered three 6-week programmes to 68 young people, aged 16 -19 years, who were at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism and organised crime. Having received ARCS funding of £20,820 for the 23/24 period, these programmes were delivered at Cliftonville FC, Larne FC and Saints Youth Club Twinbrook.

The project set out to use sport to prevent vulnerable young people from being involved or recruited into paramilitary activity, organised crime, or criminality, whilst also addressing some of the important social issues, with the classroom delivery focusing on mental health, resilience, racism, sectarianism and equality. In addition to this, it aimed to have a clear pathway identified into volunteering, training and

employment as it strengthened social inclusion, education and employability of young people through sport.

Participants are now better off on both an educational and fitness level, gaining qualifications in Disability Football Level 1 award and Grassroots Introduction Award. Increased awareness of resilience, mental health, racism, diversity and equality was achieved with 95% of participants saying that it had also improved their mental well-being. Volunteering pathways have been created with over 25 of the group immediately enrolled as IFA volunteers to work within football and attend events and the IFA have set a next step of continuing to engage with the groups in order to provide opportunities in respect of football and volunteering.



Participants at IFA's Stay Onside Community Safety Project in Cliftonville FC

ARCS PROJECTS OFFERED FUNDING DURING 2023/24

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Ardaluin Regeneration Trust	C.R.I.M.E Stop – Challenge Rubbish In My Environment	£12,000	Educational programme – environmental crime in Newcastle and surrounding areas.
Artillery Youth Centre	Youth and Community Safety Project	£15,000	Programme of diversionary activities in North Belfast aimed at local young people and community safety.
ASCERT	Should I Drive? Project	£9,000	Awareness programme for young people about the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs.
Barnardo's	Bridging the Gap	£10,000	Working with prisoners who are parents, from remand to release, focusing on the importance of maintaining relationships.
Belfast Activity Centre (BAC)	C.R.I.M.E Stop - Challenge Rubbish In My Environment	£12,000	Educational programme - environmental crime in East Belfast.
Blackie River Community Group	Safe Community - Working Together	£8,000	Community safety programme in Beechmount, Iveagh & St James areas of Belfast.
Chinese Welfare Association NI	HELPinHAND Project	£10,000	Funding towards development and launch of app to provide information for victims of race and hate crimes.
Community Intercultural Programme	INTERLINK	£9,000	Educational & support service for the Bulgarian Roma community in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.
Community Sports Network	Fresh Air for a Fresh Start	£12,000	Reduce re-offending through outdoor exploration & activities.
Connect Fermanagh	Connect Fermanagh Crime Aware Initiative	£2,000	Project involving crime awareness across Fermanagh.
Corpus Christi Youth Centre	Ballymurphy Community Development	£8,000	Youth intervention work in Ballymurphy and surrounding areas.
Crimestoppers	Safer Communities	£22,000	Online campaign targeting young people in hard to reach areas – aim to build confidence to report crime anonymously.
Crisis Café	Crisis Café ARCS Project	£2,500	Education/support programme for LGBTQIA+ community.
Crossfire Trust	Creating Safer Communities	£3,000	Ex-prisoner engagement in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.
Dialogue for Diversity	Support and Encouragement for ex-prisoners through mentoring	£7,500	Ex-prisoner support with aim of preventing reoffending.
Downpatrick Cricket Club	Downpatrick Wicketz Project	£3,000	Youth diversionary project through sport.
Edgarstown Residents Association	LADS (Let's All Do Something)	£5,000	Youth diversionary programme in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Excellence Through Exercise and Learning	The Game Changers Project	£3,000	Community engagement programme targeting young people in disadvantaged areas in Derry City & Strabane District Council area.
Falls Community Council	Community Safety Programme	£8,000	Community safety and diversionary activities in Colin, Greater Falls, Upper Falls & Springfield areas of Belfast.
Fermanagh Women's Aid and Omagh Women's Aid	Right to be Safe	£12,500	Provision of domestic abuse safety sessions across Fermanagh and Omagh areas.
Flourish NI	Resilient Survivors and Communities	£18,000	Targeted support for victims of modern slavery to prevent re-exploitation.
Grace Women's Development Ltd	Safer Community Project	£1,440	Advisory programme for vulnerable community members in North Belfast.
Greater Shantallow Community Arts	The Viral Project	£8,000	Cybercrime awareness programme in Derry City & Strabane District Council area.
Groundwork NI	Groundwork NI ARCS Project	£8,000	Engagement project focused on young men at risk of committing crime.
Holy Family Youth Centre	Increase the Peace	£6,000	Addressing anti-social behaviour in North Belfast.
Holy Trinity Youth Centre	Enhancing Civic Responsibility	£5,000	Targeting young people in Upper Springfield area promoting benefits of civically responsible lifestyles.
Hope for Justice	Spot the Signs – e-learning course	£7,500	Raise awareness of modern slavery and human trafficking.
Impact Network NI	Cybersafe	£8,000	Cybersecurity awareness project aimed at school children.
Irish FA Foundation	Stay Onside - Community Safety Project	£20,820	Youth diversionary programme targeting young people at risk of involvement in organised crime and paramilitary activity.
Kinship Care Northern Ireland (Kinship Care NI)	Thrive Project	£14,000	Targeted interventions for Looked After Children.
Lisburn YMCA	UP2U	£10,000	Youth intervention focused on sexual exploitation, coercion and violence against women.
Love Life Counselling NI	Education and Prevention of Crime in the Community	£8,000	Programme supporting victims and educating offenders of anti-social behaviour and violent and sexual offences – Lurgan and surrounding areas.
Monkstown Boxing Club	In Your Corner Project	£10,000	Diversionary and intervention programme – Monkstown and Rathcoole communities.
MUSE Counselling and Wellbeing Support Services	Breaking the Cycle	£8,000	Providing support to prisoners on release from HMP Magilligan Prison.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)	In Ctrl	£25,000	Educational programme targeting children vulnerable to becoming victims and/or perpetrators of online crime.
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)	Speak Out Stay Safe	£10,000	Co-ordination of lessons and activities to empower children across 250 primary schools in NI with safeguarding knowledge.
Newry 2020	Newry Community Leadership Network	£5,000	Crime reduction workshops and outreach programme in Newry.
Nexus	Bystander Training	£10,000	Training for youth and community groups to safely intervene in situations before a crime is committed.
NIMTT - Every Day Harmony Music Therapy	Provision of Music Therapy to individuals living in Bail Hostel Accommodation	£7,000	Music therapy to ex-prisoners residing in hostel accommodation.
NI Off Road Training	Stay Safe Moto Challenge	£10,000	Diversionary programme for at risk youths.
Northern Ireland Alternatives	Police and Community Engagement (PACE)	£14,000	Restorative practice initiative across several NI Council areas.
On Street Community Youth	Positive Leader Programme 2022-2024	£8,000	Youth engagement programme in Galliagh area.
Orchardville	Orchardville Crime Prevention & Safety Project	£16,000	Scam & online safety programme for people with a learning disability.
Parenting NI	Walking on Eggshells	£20,000	Community based project, addressing child to parent violence across NI.
Passionist Peace and Reconciliation Office	North Belfast Crime Prevention: Connecting Generations	£6,000	Engagement across interface areas of North Belfast.
PeacePlayers - Northern Ireland	Cross Community Interface League	£6,500	Targeted youth diversionary programme - risks of involvement in organised crime and paramilitary activity.
Phoenix Education Centre	D.E.A.D – Drugs End All Dreams	£12,500	Drug and alcohol awareness sessions targeting young people.
Portadown 2000	Portadown Youth Diversionary Project	£6,000	Youth diversionary programme.
Portrush Sea Cadet Unit	Youth intervention programme	£2,000	Youth intervention programme - Portrush.
Prison Arts Foundation	ARTernatives	£8,000	Prisoner engagement project through art.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
PSNI - Scamwise NI Partnership	Scams Awareness – Older Persons and non-digitally enabled groups	£24,000	Scam prevention awareness targeted at older people vulnerable to scams through appropriate media.
Rainbow Child and Family Centre	Empowered Youth	£3,000	Youth education programme targeting at risk young people in the Galliagh area.
Rathfriland Cross Community Amateur Boxing Club	Roll with the Punches	£4,000	Youth Intervention/restorative justice programme.
Scotch Street Youth and Community Centre	FUSION Project	£1,500	Youth engagement project to reduce anti-social behaviour and hate crime in Portadown area.
Shankill United Football Club and Academy	United as 1 – Changing Times	£5,000	Youth diversionary programme through sport.
SOS Bus NI	SOS Response Team	£20,000	On street support services for potential vulnerable people around Belfast.
Spanner in the Works Theatre Company	Do you see yourself	£6,000	Educational workshops and online campaign on various predominant crimes.
Start360	Reps, Rounds and Recovery	£8,000	Intervention project in Antrim & Newtownabbey Council area.
St Columbs Park Reconciliation Trust	Back Lane Project	£5,000	Community engagement programme.
St. Peters Immaculata Youth Centre	Tackling Citizenship in Contested Spaces	£5,000	Targeting young people in Lower Falls area to promote the benefits of active citizenship and responsible lifestyles.
St Ronan's College – Lurgan	Growing Together/ Actions and Consequences Moving Forward	£2,500	Schools-based project to reduce anti-social behaviour and crime prevention in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.
The Bridge Association	Bridging the Gap – believe in the impossible	£4,000	Support for adults with learning difficulties who are victims/potential victims of crime and coercive behaviours.
The Bytes Project	Youth Place	£3,000	Youth restorative initiative – Ballymoney area.
The Link Family and community Centre	Assets to Recovery	£6,000	Supporting adults with drug and alcohol dependency in Ards & North Down Council area.
The Men's Advisory Project	Supporting men who have faced and are facing interfamilial abuse	£15,000	Domestic abuse – support programme.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
The Prince's Trust	Building Youth Resilience to Crime	£10,000	Youth intervention programme.
	Counselling & Creative Therapies		
The Right Key	Programme Development	£8,000	Workshops aiming to reduce re-offending.
Vineyard Compassion	Link Logs	£6,000	Ex-Prisoner engagement to reduce reoffending.
White Ribbon NI	Listen, Learn, Lead Youth Workshop	£10,000	Community engagement and raising awareness about violence against women & girls.
YMCA Portadown	Youth In Action	£3,000	Intervention programme for young people in West Portadown Area.
YMCA North Down	Bangor City Centre Youth Engagement Project	£4,000	Youth engagement project in Bangor.



**ORGANISED
CRIME**
TASK FORCE

OCTF PUBLIC OUTREACH



CHAPTER 5: OCTF PUBLIC OUTREACH

A key priority for the partners on OCTF is to make Northern Ireland a hostile environment for organised criminals by understanding the threats and emerging organised crime trends in order to predict actions required and facilitate proactive responses.

To help raise awareness of the threat from and impact of organised criminality, it is critical that across a range of partners every effort is made to inform the public about organised crime trends and make them aware of the work of OCTF. The Task Force remains focused on issues affecting people and communities and promotes awareness raising through stakeholder groups, public outreach opportunities and other events.

OCTF AT BALMORAL SHOW IN MAY 2023

OCTF joined with PSNI and others at the Balmoral Show in May 2023. The event provided the opportunity for the Department of Justice, law enforcement agencies and the private sector to engage directly with the public to raise awareness of the range of criminal activity, which threatens lives and livelihoods in Northern Ireland. A specific crime type was highlighted on each of the four days and representatives from PSNI, Border Force, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Trading Standards, HMRC as well as Department of Justice officials were on hand to help discuss how individuals, communities and businesses can better protect themselves against crime.

OCTF partners engaged with the public to raise awareness on key community safety messages, how to stay safe online and protect themselves against fraud and the importance of reporting suspicious activity to PSNI. Fears regarding vaping were also raised, with many individuals highlighting their concerns for young people and the potential risks for those who start vaping at a young age. As well as direct engagement, a range of OCTF branded promotional goods were distributed alongside relevant information leaflets and helpline numbers.



OCTF partner agencies (PSNI and NIEA) outside the Safer Communities marquee with Permanent Secretary, Department of Justice.



Border Force dog attended the Balmoral Show and demonstrated search skills to members of the public.

PANGEA XVI

Op Pangea is a global, INTERPOL coordinated operation to disrupt the illicit online supply of medicines. The OCTF Drugs Sub Group oversees the Northern Ireland contribution to the operation.

Op Pangea XVI took place in a week of action in October 2023 and involved many countries, acting together to safeguard public health. The INTERPOL coordinated actions aimed to disrupt the illicit online supply of medicines as well as raise awareness of the significant health risks associated with buying medicines, counterfeit and illicit pharmaceuticals and medical devices on the Internet.

The Northern Ireland element of the operation involved the coordinated efforts of a number of agencies including PSNI, Border Force and medicines enforcement officers, who remain committed to combatting this serious problem. This cooperation led to the seizure of 712,000 illegal and unlicensed tablets and medicines purchased online and destined for addresses throughout Northern Ireland. During this Operation multiple packages of tablets, with a street value of approximately £785,000 were intercepted. The quantity seized represents a significant increase (almost three-fold) in seizures

compared to previous years (just over 242,000 tablets in 2022). 23 search warrants were issued, with twelve people arrested in connection with the seizures and investigations continued.

Most of the drugs seized were the hypnotic Zopiclone used as a sleeping tablet which can also reduce anxiety. Also seized was Pregabalin (known as Lyrica), which is an anticonvulsant used for pain, anxiety, epilepsy and opioid withdrawal as well as Diazepam (which shows up in many drug deaths) and Alprazolam (known by its brand name XANAX) which is illegal in the UK (also common in drug related deaths) and used for anxiety. Other medicines recovered included Botox and weight-loss products.

A media event took place where the Permanent Secretaries of Justice and Health, as well as senior representation from PSNI used the opportunity to highlight the disruptive outcome of the operation. The joint announcement of the successes of the operation highlighted the benefits of working together locally and globally and reinforced messages to the public about the significant risk to health of buying and taking medications bought online.



Detective Chief Superintendent Andy Hill (PSNI) and Permanent Secretaries of Justice and Health attend Operation Pangea's media event, showing the illicit pharmaceuticals seized during the week of action.

BELFAST POLICING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP'S (PCSP) SPRING SAFETY EVENT

Belfast PCSP's Spring Safety Event took place in the Great Hall, City Hall in March 2024. This was a free event for members of the public. Almost 600 people attended, many of whom took the time to stop and talk to Department of Justice staff who were part of the exhibition and were keen to provide practical advice on issues such as crime prevention, personal and online safety.

OCTF promotional items were distributed to visitors and useful engagement prompted interest from visitors, particularly regarding protecting themselves and their families from scams.

LAUNCH OF THE OCTF ANNUAL REPORT AND THREAT ASSESSMENT 2022/23

The Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment 2022/23 was published in June 2024. A press release and social media coverage promoted the launch of the report.

As well as highlighting OCTF successes, the annual report is a useful way to provide advice and guidance to the public about the practical steps they can take to protect themselves from organised crime and to mitigate the harm caused to businesses and communities.



Justice Minister, Naomi Long, launches the 2022/23 OCTF Annual Report and Threat Assessment.

APPENDIX 1: OCTF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

-
- Allied Irish Bank
 - An Garda Síochána (AGS)
 - Anti-Counterfeiting Group
 - Bank of Ireland
 - Belfast City Council
 - Border Force
 - Brand Solutions
 - Centre for Secure Information Technologies, QUB
 - CiSP
 - Citi Bank
 - Charity Commission NI
 - Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
 - Community Pharmacy NI
 - Confederation of British Industry
 - Criminal Assets Bureau
 - Cyberrisk
 - Cyphra
 - Danske Bank
 - Deloitte
 - Department for Communities
 - Department for the Economy
 - Department of Education
 - Department of Finance
 - Department of Health
 - Department of Justice
 - DIAGEO
 - Federation Against Copyright Theft
 - Federation of Small Businesses NI
 - Foods Standards Agency
 - Forensic Science Agency NI
 - Fujitsu
 - G4S
 - Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA)
 - Get Safe Online
 - Health and Safety Executive NI
 - Health and Social Care Board
 - HM Revenue and Customs
 - Home Office (Immigration Enforcement and UK Visas and Immigration)
 - Imperial Tobacco
 - Intellectual Property Office
 - Invest NI
 - Japan Tobacco International
 - Law Society
 - Migrant Help
 - National Crime Agency
 - National Cyber Security Centre
 - Natwest Bank
 - NI2C
 - NI Chamber of Commerce
 - NI Courts and Tribunal Service
 - NI Cyber Cluster
 - NI Environment Agency (DAERA)
 - NI Policing Board
 - NI Prison Service
 - NICVA
 - Philip Morris International
 - PSNI
 - Post Office Limited
 - Price Waterhouse Coopers
 - Probation Board NI
 - Public Health Agency
 - Public Prosecution Service NI
 - Queen's University Belfast
 - Retail NI
 - Revenue Commissioners
 - RMS Group Services
 - Royal Bank of Scotland
 - Royal Mail
 - Safer Cash
 - Security Industry Association
 - Sky
 - Supergroup
 - TMA
 - Trading Standards Service
 - UK Human Trafficking Centre
 - Ulster Bank
 - Ulster University
 - Women's Aid
- (Contacts with others not listed when appropriate)

APPENDIX 2: NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME ON PARAMILITARISM AND ORGANISED CRIME (EPPOC)

Recent data from the Northern Ireland Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) shows that paramilitarism continues to affect up to 40% of adults and 45% of young people in Northern Ireland.

EPPOC is an ambitious, innovative cross Departmental and multi-disciplinary initiative designed to address this complex problem and to create safer communities, resilient to paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control.

The Programme has operated since 2016 and is funded jointly by the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government. Phase 1, which ran to March 2021, focused on delivering 38 wide-ranging commitments in the original Executive Action Plan on paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime. A comprehensive review of the Programme took place in 2020, leading to Phase 2 which started in April 2021.

The Programme invests significant funding across its portfolio of projects. Through a mix of innovative local expertise and internationally recognised methods, projects are helping people at risk of paramilitary exploitation through early, preventative interventions, as well as providing bespoke support and signposting for people already suffering harm.

The Programme operates throughout Northern Ireland and projects vary in scale, focus, location, target group and methodology depending on assessed need. Projects must offer some form of 'additionality'. Projects are delivered through a network of Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments, statutory agencies, public sector bodies and community/ voluntary sector partners. Programme funding is ringfenced.

Cross-Executive governance and scrutiny structures allow oversight from project level through to strategic level (overseen by the Head of the Civil Service). The Programme is also scrutinised externally by the Independent Reporting Commission, created under the Fresh Start Agreement to monitor progress on tackling paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland.

Phase 2 of the Programme requires individual projects to work together to deliver shared and measurable medium and long-term objectives. This approach is explained more fully below. Individual project outcomes are important, but so too are outcomes that increase collaboration and shared understanding among delivery partners. These relationships and insights should help to ensure that the positive impact of the projects extends beyond the lifecycle of Phase 2 and that any gaps or duplication in service provision are identified and addressed. Some projects have been operating for several years; others are pilots or 'proof of concept' initiatives. The projects cover a wide spectrum – ranging from early years family support to the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community.

A Peer Review of the Programme was undertaken in early 2024. The resulting report concluded that significant progress had been made during Phase 2. It included recommendations for "strengthening and improving" the existing approach, noting that Northern Ireland has the opportunity to become an exemplar in using a public health approach to tackle the complex issue of paramilitarism.

In line with a public health approach to violence, projects operate in one of three categories:

Primary interventions: projects designed to prevent harm before it occurs. These are generally broad based; a typical example is the Communities in Transition (CIT) Project. This project is delivered by The Executive Office and aims to build capacity and support in communities which are most impacted by paramilitary activity and coercive control.

Secondary Interventions: projects that deal with harm immediately – as it is happening – and which help to stabilise the situation and prevent it worsening. These projects apply to a smaller group of people. An example is a range of projects delivered by the Education Authority supporting young people who are at risk of being involved with, influenced by, or exploited by paramilitary gangs to make positive life choices.

Tertiary Interventions: projects designed to minimise the long-term impact of paramilitarism and organised crime and prevent further victimisation. These are the most narrowly focused and bespoke types of intervention. Examples include the Aspire Project: an important initiative targeting marginalised men who are most susceptible to paramilitary / criminal influence and, therefore, most at risk of becoming involved in paramilitary or criminal activity. The project helps them to develop coping mechanisms and increase their resilience.

Project investment is an important way of addressing the complex issue of paramilitarism, but wider factors are also critical to success. The Programme has identified six strategic enablers as follows:

- 1. Political Leadership** – demonstrating clear political leadership through active support for the Programme's values and outcomes, linking these to other political priorities.
- 2. Partnerships & Alignment** – consciously aligning with other strategies and policies.
- 3. Communications** – communicating that violence is preventable and not inevitable, being clear about 'what works' and delivering public awareness campaigns that contribute to understanding and attitudinal change.
- 4. Locality working** – maximising the use of existing resources in particular areas and drawing on local expertise and connections.
- 5. Research & Best Practice** – harnessing data/evidence to understand the problem and to develop solutions that work and provide a sound basis for investment.
- 6. Governance** – the creation and championing of cross-sectoral structures that facilitate genuine collaboration and cross-departmental working to ensure shared understanding, learning and positive impact beyond the lifecycle of funding.

The Programme exhibits many of the characteristics of violence reduction units that are working across the UK and internationally. Although the Programme draws on national and international best practice, its approach is bespoke to Northern Ireland and reflects the high levels of trauma within communities as well as the complex social, economic and political context.

A system-wide approach like this makes it easier to identify gaps and duplication when it comes to interventions and ensures a more effective use of public funds.

Benefits data

Phase 2 of the Programme has moved away from focusing on measuring individual project outputs, to a position where individual projects actively work together to deliver progress, including measuring their joint impact and reporting on shared Benefits. There are three Benefit Realisation Groups – Keeping People Safe; Protective Factors; and Community Resilience.

Each group has a focus on a particular cluster of shared outcomes or benefits, reflecting either existing links or links that it would be helpful to develop. The projects linked to each Benefit group share information and benefit profiles which are collated in the Programme's overall reporting.

Much of Phase 2 activity has been focused on sharing best practice; demonstrating the importance of understanding issues; proactively addressing paramilitarism beyond the Programme; and understanding 'what works' and how to scale up that activity beyond the Programme. There have been significant developments in learning and best practice in relation to support for people at risk.

The emerging Programme data and evidence confirms the findings of other studies that point to significant levels of trauma in communities where paramilitary activity is prevalent and among those who are receiving or seeking support from the Programme. For that reason, the Programme is seeking to be trauma informed in all that it does; this means giving due consideration to the impact that trauma has on victims of paramilitarism, as well as those who help and support them.

Projects are reporting levels of exposure to paramilitary violence among participants that is higher than the population level trends. This could be that a participant has been the victim of such violence, has witnessed violence, been threatened by violence or has a family member who is the victim.

The level of trauma and adversity amongst the participants on projects under the Programme is also much higher than population averages. Projects are working with individuals with highly complex needs, including mental health issues, addiction issues, experience of trauma, at times as well as poor family, community and peer support.

This includes large numbers of participants on some projects with probable Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of exposure to violence, including from paramilitaries.

To date, data at project, programme and population level has been gathered to help with understanding the Programme's impact.

Some examples of contribution to Benefits are set out below.

Keeping People Safe

Thousands of victims of paramilitary violence have been supported through projects. This includes young people supported in multiple ways: through youth work, including in two hospital emergency departments; a multi-agency support hub; individuals supported through a bespoke project for victims of paramilitary violence; and those signposted through multiple projects.

There is a downward trend (seen in multiple data sources) in the number of intimidations and in the types of paramilitary activity that cause the highest harm, including murder and violent assaults and shootings.

Protective Factors

Hundreds of women were supported to develop their skills in community leadership, develop their life and social skills and help them reduce their vulnerability to paramilitary exploitation.

Thousands of young people were supported through youth work based diversionary and wider support projects. 58% of youth had a mental health issue – up to 40% PTSD – most had witnessed violence. At endpoint, there was a statistically significant reduction in PTSD.

Hundreds of boys and young men at risk of paramilitary harm and/or involvement were supported through social work and bespoke mentoring. This project promotes life and social skills development and also offers bespoke mental health and substance use support. Clients find improvements in their mental health, wellbeing, drugs, alcohol, use of time and offending behaviours. There has been an increase in the ability of these young men to live a crime free life, with 93% noting the support has helped them resist negative influences with the community.

The Developing Women in the Community project has seen improvements in self-efficacy and the locus of control, as well as a reduction in anxiety, depression and probable PTSD.

Community Resilience

Thousands of young people participated in a range of activities including sport, wellbeing, community safety, active citizenship and a community development diploma.

Multiple Communities In Transition projects provide an opportunity for people in communities to get involved in community life, empowering people and groups to take part in local programmes that have a positive impact on themselves and their community. This has included tens of thousands of participants in social action projects, volunteering and community events.

Public Awareness Campaign

The Programme is responsible for the 'Ending the Harm' series of hard-hitting public awareness campaigns. These campaigns highlight how paramilitary and organised crime activity can have a devastating impact on victims, their families, local communities and wider society.

The current campaign, which was launched in June 2021, highlights how paramilitary groups use illegal money lending to control and coerce vulnerable people. The campaign challenges the acceptability and normalisation of illegal money lending. It highlights how victims, who are often struggling to make ends meet, are then exploited and preyed on for other criminal means.

Post campaign tracking to date has revealed a shift in public attitudes in relation to perceptions of the perpetrators and victims of this type of criminal activity.

The Programme has also launched a series of three case study videos to highlight the harm that is perpetrated by paramilitary gangs against young people.

More information about the Programme and the 'Ending the Harm' public awareness campaign is available at www.endingtheharm.com

APPENDIX 3: USEFUL CONTACTS

Organised Crime Task Force

www.octf.gov.uk

PSNI

www.psnipolice.uk

CrimeStoppers Northern Ireland

www.crimestoppers-uk.org/in-your-area/northern-ireland

Border Force

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/border-force

Department for Communities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Department of Justice

www.justice-ni.gov.uk

HM Revenue and Customs

www.hmrc.gov.uk

Immigration Enforcement

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/immigration-enforcement www.gov.uk/report-immigration-crime

National Crime Agency

www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

www.daera-ni.gov.uk

PCSPs (Policing and Community Safety Partnerships)

<https://www.pcsp.org>

Trading Standards Service

www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/consumer-affairs/trading-standards-service

A close-up photograph of a man with dark, curly hair and a full beard, looking down at a smartphone in his hands. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is serious and focused.

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