



**ORGANISED
CRIME
TASK FORCE**

**ANNUAL
REPORT
2022/23**

**& THREAT
ASSESSMENT**

Organised Crime in
Northern Ireland

www.octf.gov.uk



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ANNUAL REPORT & THREAT ASSESSMENT 2022/23

MAY 2024

FOREWORD

BY JUSTICE MINISTER NAOMI LONG MLA

It is an honour and privilege to return as Justice Minister now that the Northern Ireland institutions have been reinstated and I am pleased to publish this 2022/23 Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) report, which outlines the efforts and successes of OCTF partners and sets out the assessed threat assessment and response in relation to key organised crime types.

In the two years since I was last in post, policing and law enforcement has changed and law enforcement agencies continue to evolve and embrace new technologies and adapt further to existing as well as emerging threats. I continue to be impressed and encouraged by their dedication, commitment and persistence in thwarting criminals who set out to exploit, threaten and spread misery and fear across communities and particularly those most vulnerable.

The work to disrupt organised crime groups, pursue criminals and bring them to justice is complex and challenging and I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of all those organisations involved in the OCTF for the work they continue to do to tackle organised criminality and seize the proceeds of crime. I am delighted that cash and assets of around £4.8 million have been seized from criminals during this reporting period.

Swift progress was made in Westminster at the start of this reporting period to introduce the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022, which applies to the whole of the UK, including Northern Ireland. The Act was intended to counter illicit financial activity from Russia, enforce sanctions and help in the wider fight against corruption and serious crime as the war on Ukraine began. It is important that law enforcement investigators have the tools they need to investigate these criminals, and that Northern Ireland keeps pace with reforms elsewhere.



The work of all the partners represented on the OCTF is essential in delivering the aim of the NI Organised Crime Strategy 2021-2024, to protect individuals, communities and businesses from organised crime. I will shortly publish a refresh to the Strategy in the form of an Addendum Workplan which will set out how, during 2024/25, we plan to deliver on our strategic vision of protecting individuals, communities and businesses from organised crime.

An update on the outcomes achieved in 2022/23 are set out in this report, which demonstrates progress across a range of themes to reduce the harm caused by organised crime. One of the most significant areas of harm is drug abuse which negatively affects not only the individuals who abuse drugs but their families, their friends, local business and also government. During 2022/23 police seized drugs with an estimated street value of over £9 million and Border Force was involved in seizures of Class B drugs with an estimated street value of £2.4 million.

You will read more about it later in this report, but Op Pangea is an international initiative, led by Interpol, aimed at combating global trafficking of illicit prescription medicines. A week of action in June 2022 resulted in 15 searches and 10 arrests

with over 240,000 pills seized with an estimated street value of £250,000. This is a prime example of collaborative working, resulting in unregulated drugs, often produced in unhygienic and unregulated environments, being seized as they enter Northern Ireland. On their own or in any combination these drugs are incredibly dangerous.

Whilst law enforcement can seize illegal drugs and arrest drug dealers this alone cannot tackle the problem. The ability to address substance misuse and dependency requires a holistic systemic approach.

Organised crime groups are motivated primarily by profit and financial gain is the key driver for almost all serious, organised and acquisitive crime; it is, therefore, essential that we send a clear and consistent message that crime does not pay. 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 (from October 2023 to March 2024) saw almost £1 million being allocated to community-based projects covering a wide range of issues such as drug support projects, diversionary projects for young people and restorative justice initiatives.

I commend the work of partners highlighted throughout this report and welcome their ongoing engagement and continued commitment to tackling all forms of criminality. I encourage everyone to note the outcomes achieved and to consider ways in which we can all support the professional teams working to help create safer communities across Northern Ireland.



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 807060

MODERN SLAVERY HELPLINE
0800 0121 700

CRIMESTOPPERS
0800 555 111

***CrimeStoppers Northern Ireland is an independent charity that takes information about crime 100% anonymously via the freephone 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 34 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 an individual level, multiple victims can be targeted by and be vulnerable to scams, often facilitated by technology. Where people buy and use counterfeit goods, this can have serious negative impacts on health and well-being. 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

Organised crime is not static, neither are organised crime groups (OCGs). At the end of the 2022/23 financial year, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) assessed that 55 OCGs were operating in Northern Ireland.

Over this reporting period a number of successful interventions, such as searches, arrests and seizures were carried out, resulting in the disruption*, dismantling** or frustration*** of an organised crime group. Many OCGs are involved in multiple types of organised criminality, with the vast majority linked to drugs offences.

The successes against OCGs occurred throughout the year, meaning that an OCG could be subject to more than one frustration, disruption or dismantling in that time period. It is possible that the number of successes can be greater than the number of OCGs. Also, the number of OCGs is given at a specific date, whereas the number of successes refers to a longer period of time.

This reporting period has seen a significant increase in activity across PSNI's Organised Crime Branch when compared to the previous financial year 2021/22. The numbers of disruptions against OCGs increased by 30% and the number of frustrations increased by 115%.

*Disrupted

The arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one main principal for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence, or the arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against two or more group members (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or seizure of assets on two or more occasions or a substantial single seizure.

**Dismantled

The arrest and charge or instigation of criminal proceedings against the main principals for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence.

***Frustrated

Planned activity by Police Service of Northern Ireland which prevents organised crime groups from carrying out criminal activity, or the arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one or more group member(s) (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or seizure of assets on one occasion.

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, MSHT, criminal finance and intellectual property crime (including counterfeit goods).

An OCTF EU exit sub group was established in December 2020 and met regularly under the theme of “emerging threats” until June 2023. Its key purpose was to identify and proactively manage emerging threats that may arise due to the end of the transition period marking the UK’s formal exit from the European Union. The group’s primary focus was on the potential exploitation of the Common Travel Area (CTA) by OCGs involved in drugs importation and distribution, organised immigration crime, human trafficking, firearms, the importation of tobacco, alcohol and counterfeit goods.

Since the commencement of the operation, over £20.5 million worth of drugs have been seized, as well as other illegal commodities including cigarettes, counterfeit goods and weapons.

The OCTF Emerging Threats Sub Group has been a successful forum and met regularly for approximately three years in the lead up to and after EU exit. As a result of its activities, considerable improvements in information sharing and partnership working across many areas has been achieved and these improvements are now part of mainstream business. For this reason in June 2023 standalone meetings of this Group ceased and any further updates on emerging threat assessments are now a standard item on the agenda of OCTF Strategy Group meetings.

The Armed Robbery and Extortion Sub Group was established over a decade ago and during the intervening period was a priority area due to the scale of armed robberies on cash-in-transit couriers, tiger kidnappings and thefts from ATMs.

Through the actions of the Sub Group partners there has been a considerable reduction in the number of all these offences. In view of this, and based on the current threat assessment, the OCTF Strategy Group agreed to put the work of this Sub Group on hold for an interim period. OCTF will keep this under review; the Group can be re-established in the event of any increase in related criminal activity or revised threat assessment.

Meanwhile public awareness raising continues regarding illegal money lending through the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) funded “Ending the Harm” campaign (see **Appendix 2** for further details).

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 multi-agency strategy to help protect individuals, communities and businesses in Northern Ireland from organised crime. The Strategy came into effect on 1 April 2021 and is available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/organised-crime-strategy>.

The strategic objectives are aligned to four thematic pillars of:

- **Pursue:** pursuing offenders through investigation, disruption and prosecution.
- **Prepare and Protect:** supporting individuals, communities, systems and businesses to mitigate vulnerability and impact.
- **Prevent:** deterring and diverting people from engaging and re-engaging in organised crime.
- **Partnership:** creating a sustainable, efficient, effective and collaborative system response.

The Strategy articulates a clear common vision and identifies roles, responsibilities, priorities and accountability structures which is important both for law enforcement agencies and statutory bodies delivering the Strategy and also to demonstrate to the public the shared commitment to tackling organised criminality in all its forms.

The Strategy acknowledges interdependences and links with other work streams at both a local and national level. It complements and aligns with the work being taken forward through the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC), the operational focus of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force (see **Appendix 2** for further details) and the cross jurisdictional Joint Agency Task Force (JATF).¹

The OCTF Strategy Group, supported by the OCTF Sub Groups, oversees the implementation of strategic actions. A key action in the Strategy is the development of **new organised crime offences in Northern Ireland**. The Department of Justice continues to develop proposals for bespoke new legislation to strengthen the response to organised crime by creating new offences specific to serious organised crime. Following a public consultation in 2020, the Department proposes, subject to the legislative process, to bring forward draft legislation to the Northern Ireland Assembly to introduce a statutory definition of Serious Organised Crime and new offences relating to serious organised crime. This work will continue into 2023/24 and beyond, as far as it can be accommodated within the NI Assembly legislative timeframe.

Another important focus of the Strategy is **asset recovery**. OCTF agencies can draw on powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) 2002² 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 through the local Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS), or into reinforcing law enforcement's capability to disrupt criminal activity through the pursuit of criminal assets through the Assets Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS). More information about the projects that benefited from ARCS funding in 2022/23 and how ARIS money is used to support law enforcement is set out in **Chapter 4**.

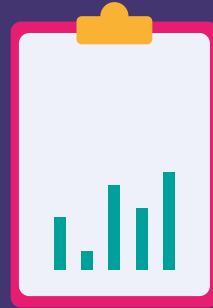
1 JATF is a cross border operational task force established following the Fresh Start Agreement in December 2015

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

i 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.

scales STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:
 Ensure we have effective capability, tools and legislation to tackle organised crime affecting Northern Ireland.

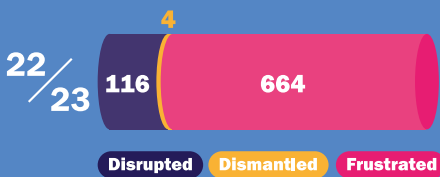
JUNE 2021

Progress was made on introducing new legislation to make NI a safer place to live, e.g The Economic Crime & Corporate Transparency Bill; Online Safety Bill and Serious Organised Crime consultation



First Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) was sought by the NCA.

refresh STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3:
 Continuous pursuit of those involved in organised crime.



Number of **Organised Crime Groups** reported by PSNI as **frustrated** or **dismantled** in the final quarter of 2022/23

8,933
 PSNI drug seizure incidents

3,244
 PSNI drug related arrests



Border Force drug seizures:
227Kg
 Class A & B Drugs

216,000
 Illicit Prescription Tablets

27 Offensive Weapons



24 Account freezing orders (£0.6m)



132 Cash seizures (£1.3m)



8 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**



530

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

Asset Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) continued to support **67 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 be involved in **offending behaviour**



The Executive Programme on Paramilitarism & Organised Crime



The programme has invested **£17.1m** 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.



29 OCTF and JAFF Strategic and threat-specific meetings to address organised crime.



Regular **strategic engagement** and ongoing **operational activity** with **other jurisdictions** to tackle **serious organised crime**



OP Pangea, a global Interpol coordinated week long operation to **disrupt the illicit online supply of medicines**. NI's 2022 contribution: 242,000+ illegal, unlicensed products seized, with a street value of almost **£250,000**



**ORGANISED
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TASK FORCE

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 OCTF and administers the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS). Representatives from relevant agencies are represented on 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 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 (MSHT) Unit 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 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 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.



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 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.



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.



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



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.

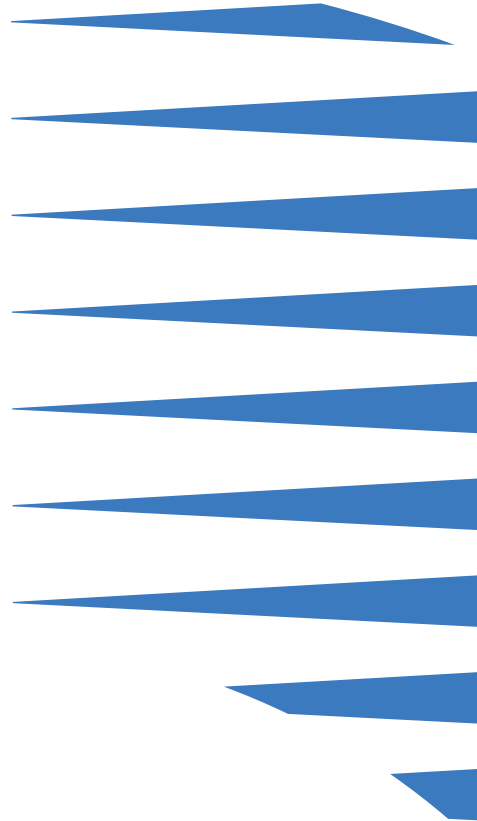

The SIA works closely with local and national police forces, local authority licensing partners, other enforcement agencies, security providers, buyers and venue owners to understand, identify and successfully mitigate a broad range of public protection and safeguarding risks. These include terrorism, 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.



**ORGANISED
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THREAT AND OCTF RESPONSE 2022/23

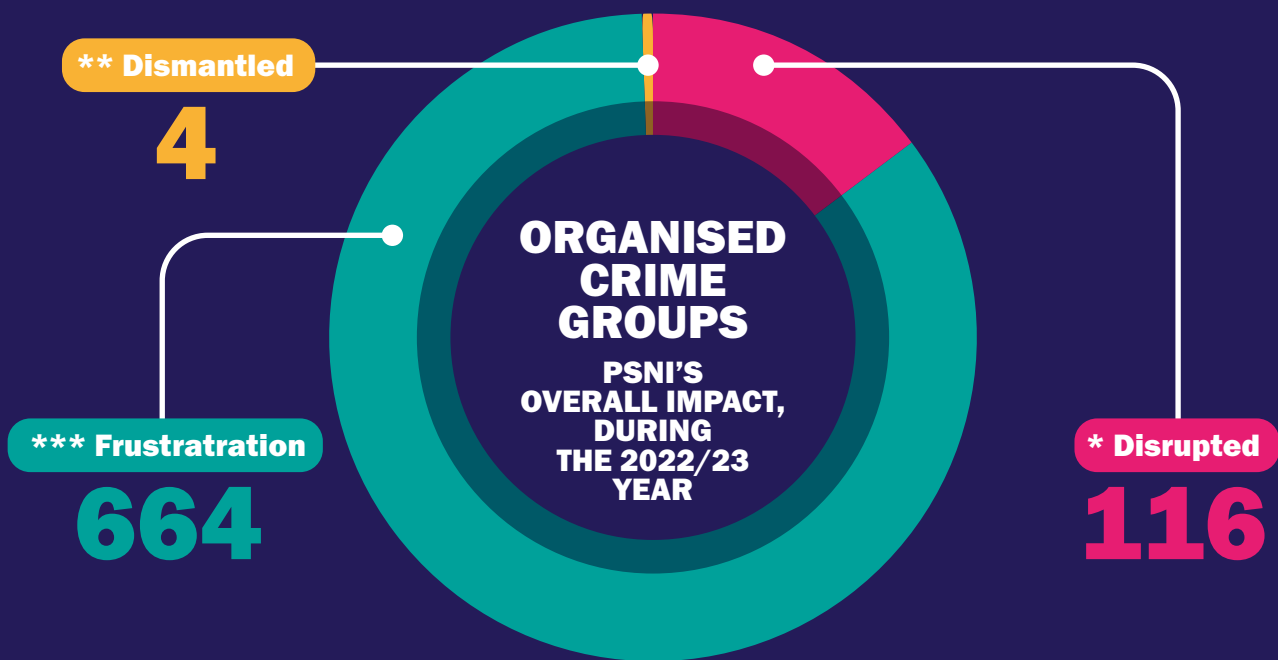




This chapter highlights the outputs from partner organisations and the outcomes of the strategic approach to tackling criminality in all its forms, assessing how far the work contributes to achieving the objectives of the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Strategy. The earlier summary infographic highlights some of the key achievements during 2022/23.

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 2022/23



530[#]
POTENTIAL VICTIMS OF MODERN SLAVERY RECOVERED

***Disrupted**

The arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one main principal for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence, or the arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against two or more group members (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or seizure of assets on two or more occasions or a substantial single seizure.

****Dismantled**

The arrest and charge or instigation of criminal proceedings against the main principals for an offence which would normally warrant a prison sentence.

*****Frustrated**

Planned activity by Police Service of Northern Ireland which prevents organised crime groups from carrying out criminal activity, or the arrest and/or instigation of criminal proceedings against one or more group member(s) (not main principal) for an offence that would normally warrant a prison sentence, or seizure of assets on one occasion.

DRUGS SEIZURES AND ARRESTS



8,933

Drug seizures



3,224

Drug-related arrests



227kg

Of Class A drugs & B drugs



48kg

Cannabis



21kg

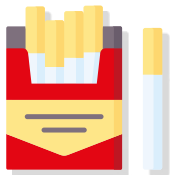
Cocaine

PSNI

**BORDER FORCE
SEIZURES**

**NCA
SEIZURES**

SEIZURES OF OTHER ILLICIT GOODS BY BORDER FORCE



872,000

Cigarettes &
280 kg tobacco



3,242

Items of counterfeit
goods



216,000

Illicit prescription
drugs



27

Offensive
weapons

ASSET RECOVERY SUCCESSES BY PSNI

Confiscation
Orders

£1 million

Cash
Forfeitures

£1 million

Cash
Seizures

£1.3 million

Account Freezing
Orders (AFOs)

£0.7 million

3.1 CYBER CRIME

THE THREAT

Motivations behind cybercrime can vary, from state sponsored actors seeking to obtain sensitive information or intellectual property, to monetary motivations, political motivations and individuals who are sexually motivated seeking access to social media and the potential of private intimate images of the owner. Motivation can also include the seeking of kudos and notoriety of causing disruption (for example teenagers carrying out Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks). Overall, the vast majority of incidents reported to PSNI are driven by a financial motivation.

The evolution of technology and enhanced connectivity has increased the opportunity for criminals to exploit victims online. The heightened reliance on digital communications and use of technology post-pandemic has accelerated the risk to organisations, public/private sectors and individuals. This vulnerability relates to both **cyber-dependent** crime and **cyber-enabled** crime.

Cyber-dependent crime is defined as crime that can only be committed using computers, networks or other information communication technologies (for example ransomware, DDoS attacks and unauthorised access). **Cyber-enabled** crime relates to traditional crime types exploited by technology, with fraud being the most prevalent offence. This includes targeting by offenders through social media manipulation, phishing scams and email compromises. Other examples include drugs procurement online and money laundering via cryptocurrency.

Cyber offenders are becoming more sophisticated, adapting and developing their criminal tactics as new technologies emerge. It follows that there is a fundamental requirement for law enforcement to enhance investigative strategies and training to keep up with these emerging trends. The existing threat posed by cyber criminals to individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland mirrors that of the UK collectively, and whilst reported cyber-dependent crime has declined as cyber security awareness has

developed amongst businesses and organisations, there has been a significant rise in online crime, particularly due to frauds. Financial losses are challenging to quantify and any figure derived must be tempered against the known and ongoing challenge posed by under-reporting of such crimes.

Emerging Cyber-Dependent Offending Methods

- **Ransomware** – There has been an emergence of lower value ransom demands for payment as part of suspect offending. This is a shift from higher level demands and may make payment more compelling for businesses and organisations to get up and running. There has also been an evolution of more ransomware variants.
- **Unauthorised Access/Network Intrusion Blackmails** – A re-emerging trend is rather than ransomware attacks, systems have been accessed with data extracted and a blackmail demand left with a threat of exposure. Rather than locking down systems, data has been deleted or extracted, with leverage stronger for sensitive data. If the compromised businesses/organisations do not pay, data has been offered for sale on the Dark Web including on sites hosted in Russia.
- **Phishing** – Although more orientated to cyber-enabled fraud, email phishing scams continue to be reported in volume to law enforcement and are becoming more sophisticated and elaborate.
- **Cryptocurrency** – Being decentralised, cryptocurrency remains a medium for criminality, including ransom demands and use on the Dark Web for illicit purposes (e.g. drugs purchases). Its use in cyber fraud incidents such as sextortion blackmails has been maintained and is growing.
- **Private Branch Exchange (PBX) Frauds** – PBX is used by internal and external communications. These frauds are also known as “dial through frauds” where offenders hack into the PBX system and re-route calls to premium/international rate numbers. These offences have re-emerged due to poor password discipline. This remains a vulnerability to businesses without sufficient protocols in place.

Ransomware

In respect of cyber-dependent crime, ransomware attacks remain arguably the most devastating, with various strains of ransomware reported within Northern Ireland. Typically, businesses have been left with limited ability to operate and facing a demand for payment in cryptocurrency or other anonymised payment sources. In respect of cryptocurrency demands, it is a remaining trend that the amount demanded and crypto wallet payment address details are not initially known and are only provided if the organisation chooses to engage with the OCG behind the attack.

Ransomware has evolved from traditionally involving lock down of systems with blackmail demands for payment to be made for access to be regained (i.e. decryption keys to be paid for to unlock systems), to include extortion orientated attacks. During this reporting period, there has been an upward trend in extortion-only ransomware attacks where data was infiltrated and abstracted from a system without encryption occurring and a ransom was demanded to prevent data being published. This is an evolution in tactics and may reflect the decline of ransomware payments in the UK by almost 40% in 2022 compared to the previous year.

Following a ransomware attack, the cost to the victim organisation is not adequately reflected in the extortion amount sought by the criminal gang behind the attack. In many cases the details of this demand are not immediately provided to the victim organisation and will only become known by interacting with the criminals. Many organisations choose not to do this. Unseen costs are also associated with post incident support, rebuilding infrastructure, staff training and developing resilience. PSNI continues to recommend that ransom demands are not paid. The increased intricacy of such attacks poses challenges, both to victims in mitigating the attacks and for law enforcement agencies in investigating. PSNI Cyber Crime investigators monitor emerging trends and offending methods which is key to developing the Protect message through engagement with organisations and sectors and to mitigate the risk posed.

Hacking/Unauthorised Access

Unauthorised access through “hacking” and specifically “hacking” of social media or email accounts, represents the majority of cyber orientated incidents reported to police. Such violations can occur through simple login using known or compromised credentials, or through more advanced access techniques used by cyber offenders such as malware, data harvesters and password tools. Beyond social media and email access, this can also include unauthorised access through abusing possession of known login credentials. For example, a disgruntled ex-employee leaves a company for a competitor but still has access to their former company’s files through remote login.

Whether businesses or individuals are impacted, unauthorised access can cause significant financial harm and loss of control can have serious implications. Whether a business, organisation or individual is impacted, such attacks could have been avoided in most cases by using basic security provisions such as multi-factor authentication.

Post-pandemic, the working landscape has changed and this has come with further opportunities for cyber offenders to exploit, with the intention of causing harm. For example, employees working from home and using remote desktop access are vulnerable if they fail to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN), have a lack of multi factor authentication and weak passwords are in place.

Unauthorised Access via Phishing

The public and private sectors have been impacted by an increase in phishing attacks through spoof emails. Several cases have been reported which involved targeting of public sector employees, including government departments, through spoof emails which represented as coming from authority. Whilst such emails often relate to fraud attempts, there has been an emerging trend with phishing emails being accompanied by a malicious attachment with a generic heading e.g. “Project Plans” which is designed for individuals to click on, in the belief it relates to employment. Once clicked on, the contact list of the user is impacted and the email then cascades to others within their sector. This enhances the range for phishing opportunities. One such example in

Northern Ireland involved 14 companies within the same sector being impacted in what was effectively a domino effect of a phishing email and malicious attachments being opened.

DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) Attacks

The trend for this cyber crime type has reduced within the reporting period. Whilst there may be an element of under-reporting to law enforcement, stronger cyber security and threat mitigation has no doubt helped to limit such attacks.

Dark Web/Cryptocurrency

The Dark Web continues to offer an attractive platform for those trading in illegal commodities. The anonymity afforded, coupled with the ability to use cryptocurrency, is a stark example of how criminal groups have embraced technology. There has been a significant increase in investigation support taskings to PSNI Cyber Investigators in respect of both the Dark Web and cryptocurrency and it is anticipated that this trend will continue. The PSNI Cyber Crime Centre has increased training of officers in the areas of cryptocurrency and the Dark Web to meet this demand.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Police Service of Northern Ireland Cyber Crime Centre

As part of Team Cyber UK, PSNI maintains a specialist and dedicated investigation team, staffed by experienced Detectives, in order to address and investigate the ongoing threat of cyber crime.

The primary work of PSNI's Cyber Investigations Team relates to cyber-dependent crime which impacts on business, government agencies, academia and (in conjunction with national partners) critical national infrastructure which may include, for example, transport networks and food supply.

Cyber Investigators are co-located with, and supported by, PSNI's Digital Forensic capacity to best address this complex area of policing. Current investigations are being supported by internal Police Service partners, United Kingdom Police Services, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and international law enforcement partners.

This approach is at the core of ensuring that investigative opportunities are progressed to the fullest in this challenging arena, which routinely have an international element.

The investigation team also hosts and supports PSNI's Prevent and Protect Officers who are experienced Detectives, selected from the Investigation Team for these specialist roles.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Cyber Prevent

A dedicated PSNI Prevent Officer continues to work alongside government, academia and industry professionals to deliver the Cyber Prevent message through educational awareness of the Computer Misuse Act 1990. The potential consequences of cyber offending are re-enforced alongside the positive direction towards further education and career pathways in cyber security. The Prevent Officer also continues to liaise with government departments such as the Department of Justice and the Home Office regarding the Northern Ireland section of the National Prevent Strategy.

PSNI continues to utilise NCA Cyber Choices material which contains the key prevent guidance in an age appropriate manner for children, parents/guardians and teachers. Cyber Choices presentations have been delivered throughout Northern Ireland to youth groups, clubs and organisations as well as educational establishments spanning from primary to tertiary level. One of these presentations was attended by a representative from Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport thus increasing the awareness of the Cyber Choices message across government departments.

Cyber Choices: Helping you choose the right and legal path - National Crime Agency

The delivery of the Prevent message is a fundamental part of informing young people of the risk of serious legal consequences to committing cyber crime. The availability of cheap online tools allows for inexperienced cyber offenders to commit disruptive offences in what they often perceive as a victimless crime. The continued comprehensive delivery of the Prevent message is fundamental towards preventing the escalation of this online crime through education and awareness of the legislation and consequences.

The Prevent Officer has assisted in research undertaken by Masters students from Queens University Belfast (QUB) who examined the Prevent programme. They looked specifically at how the Prevent message raised cyber security awareness of primary school children and they sought to develop strategies to take the Prevent programme forward.

The Prevent Officer also collaboratively engaged with the EU-funded Project Rayuela which focused on cross border cyber crime primarily throughout the EU countries but also encompassing countries outside the EU. This project was a multi-disciplinary working group that developed innovative methodologies for enhanced cyber security and aimed to educate children between the ages of 11-16 about online safety through a captivating video game experience. The testing of this programme was ongoing throughout 2023 and PSNI are currently reviewing dissemination and delivery of the programme.

The Prevent Officer continues to engage in the early non judicial intervention of low level cyber-dependent crime through the use of the NCA Cease and Desist notices and provides appropriate advice and guidance in relation to cyber ethics and behaviour online. This strategy is fundamental towards the education and positive re-direction of young people towards further educational and career goals.

PSNI Cyber Protect

The PSNI Cyber Crime Centre maintains one dedicated full time Detective who acts as the Regional Protect and Prepare Officer.

As part of the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) 'Cyber Protect Network', the PSNI Cyber Protect Officer works in partnership with counterparts based within the Regional Organised Crime Units (RICU) in England and Wales, Metropolitan Police, Police Scotland and British Transport Police to help 'Protect and Prepare' individuals and organisations to mitigate the threat posed by cyber crime and its potential impact. Working with the City of London National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB) and the National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU), Regional Protect Officers lead on the delivery of advice to victims reporting cyber-dependent crime to Action Fraud and the issuing of cyber vulnerability notifications to local organisations.

As trusted partners of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), the Cyber Protect Network works to promote and develop the adoption of key cyber actions aimed at protecting individuals and organisations against common cyber attacks.

Actions seen as key to protecting individuals and micro/small businesses from cyber crime are covered by the NCSC Cyber Aware programme and form the nucleus of advice passed on by the Cyber Protect Officer at one-to-one victim engagements or talks delivered to employees, conference attendees or community groups. Good practice should include;

- creating a unique password for your email account;
- creating strong passwords using three random words;
- saving passwords in your browser or password manager;
- turning on two step verification (2SV);
- updating your devices;
- ensuring your important data is backed up; and
- reporting suspicious messages.

Working in partnership with Northern Ireland organisations such as the Northern Ireland Cyber Security Centre, the Cyber Protect officer works to raise awareness of NCSC services that can support local organisations and representative bodies as they work to strengthen their cyber security. Working alongside cyber security organisations within local private sector, the Cyber Protect Officer works to raise awareness of NCSC programs such as Cyber Essentials and Early Warning which are seen as crucial to developing resilience to common cyber attacks.

Alongside victim engagements, the Protect Officer supports local organisations and representative bodies in their efforts to raise awareness of the importance of cyber security amongst employees, volunteers and members. This assistance can take the form of delivering cyber awareness sessions to public/staff groups, running Cyber Protect Network tabletop exercises such as the Cyber Escape Room and speaking/exhibiting at Private/Public Sector employer conferences.



PSNI's Cyber Protect display at various events

Examples of working in partnership during 2022/2023 include:

- Support to the Organised Crime Task Force with attendance at a cyber themed day at the Balmoral Show.
- Support to NCSC Cyber Essentials delivery partner IASME with development of local public private sector partnership aimed at increasing adoption of Cyber Essentials.
- Delivery of cyber awareness sessions and tabletop exercises to Northern Ireland charity managers and staff.
- Delivery of cyber awareness session to older persons groups.
- Support to financial institution partners with delivery of cyber awareness sessions to corporate banking customers.
- Support of Mid Ulster PCSP and Crime Prevention Early Engagement with delivery of cyber awareness session to local businesses.
- Delivery of Cyber Protect Vulnerability notifications on behalf of the National Cyber Crime Unit.
- Exhibition and delivery of tabletop cyber exercises carried out at the 2023 Northern Ireland Public Sector Cyber Security conference.

- Exhibition and talk provided to Ulster Teachers Union annual conference.
- Support to Business in the Community Northern Ireland 'Safer Internet Day' program with delivery of virtual cyber awareness session viewed live by 4500+ primary school pupils.
- Participation in US Embassy London 'Building Devolved National Government Resilience Exchange Program' alongside partners from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland local government and academia.

Organised Crime Task Force Cyber Crime Engagement Sub Group

The Organised Crime Task Force Cyber Crime Engagement Sub Group continues to provide an important forum allowing engagement between the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Department of Justice, private and non-government organisations as well as academia and the cyber security industry. The forum allows partnership working in order to promote reporting mechanisms and share information.

RESULTS

Cyber Crime Figures

Online crime, formerly cyber-enabled crime, is highlighted by way of a specific “flag” on PSNI’s crime recording system, with the aim of providing both a local overview and feeding in to the national picture of how the internet and digital communication are being used to offend. The reporting officer uses this “flag” when they believe that, on the balance of probability, the offence was committed, in full or in part, by way of a computer, network or digital device.

During 2022/2023, a total of 7226 cyber-related crimes were flagged which was a 7% increase from the previous year 2021/2022 when 6745 such crimes were recorded. This is indicative of society’s enhanced reliance on digital technology and therefore exposure to risk. Within the reports received, 286 cyber-dependent crimes were reported by Northern Ireland victims to Action Fraud.

Under-reporting from both businesses and individuals continue to impact on PSNI’s understanding of the full extent of cyber-dependent crime.

CASE STUDY

ONLINE EXTORTION, FRAUD AND CYBER ENABLED SEXUAL OFFENCES

This is an investigation into a Registered Sex Offender who continued to offend against young adult females by either compromising their social media accounts or luring them by way of false adverts seeking lingerie models. The suspect’s offending was sexually motivated and Cyber Investigators worked closely with Public Protection Branch and UK law enforcement partners. The investigation required follow-up victim engagement and extensive enquiries. It generated 49 charges relating to sexual offences, fraud and computer misuse offences and a high volume of victims were impacted. The defendant has pleaded guilty to relevant charges and sentencing is imminent.

CASE STUDY

SERVER COMPROMISE AND BLACKMAIL MITIGATION

PSNI Investigators received a report of data exposure and ransom demand from a data hosting company which provides hosting services for around 120-130 UK and Republic of Ireland-based charities focused on supporting victims of domestic abuse, child abuse, mental health etc. and the data is considered sensitive. They found their servers containing sensitive data had been wiped and a ransom note had been placed on their system with a threat of exposure. Parallel to the investigation itself, this necessitated extensive Protect mitigation follow-up with impacted clients including contingency advice and proactive engagement with 92 client organisations across the UK and Republic of Ireland. Cyber Protect developed a dissemination package and clients were contacted to provide reassurance and salient advice, given the vulnerabilities. This was coordinated and led by the PSNI Cyber Protect Officer and included disseminations throughout the UK ROCU Network and colleagues in Republic of Ireland. The dynamic mitigation follow-up and engagement averted potential hysteria and enhanced reassurance to organisations and their vulnerable client base.

CASE STUDY

DDOS PROSECUTION

Following an extensive investigation into online cyber-attacks (DDoS), possession of illegal software and fraud activity, a suspect was prosecuted in January 2023. This investigation involved the suspect targeting and crashing of a vast range of websites worldwide including a gaming company (causing a substantial loss), a financial company, numerous police public information websites, a human rights group and also involvement in organising an orchestrated cyber attack on a pay-per-view celebrity boxing event. The defendant (a juvenile at the time of offending) was convicted of 19 charges and received a 20 month suspended sentence.

CASE STUDY

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP CO-ORDINATION

During the reporting period, Cyber Investigators researched and developed packages received from NCA in respect of a coordinated investigation into the UK-based users of an online marketplace GENESIS. This marketplace offered compromised credentials which were obtained through the use of info-stealer malware. This is part of a global investigation into the marketplace which involves global cooperation between European law enforcement and the FBI. PSNI's Cyber Investigators resolved three packages for action and executed search warrants (multiple digital items seized) and interviews of four suspects. The investigation remains live.

FORWARD LOOK

Investigations Training: As detailed, PSNI has enhanced training in specialist areas around cryptocurrency and the Dark Web. Further advanced training is scheduled for Investigators in these areas to enhance the investigative response.

Protect/ Prevent: These portfolios will be maintained with engagements across public/ private sectors, academia, business, charities and across social groups in enhancing the cyber Protect message and the dangers of online criminality.

Cross Border Partnerships: Beyond the already established partnerships within Team Cyber UK and local partnerships under Cyber Protect and Cyber Prevent, PSNI investigations are in planning with An Garda Síochána (AGS) in respect of cross border cyber attack mitigation, communication, investigation and co-ordination in respect of live cyber-attacks and a simulation exercise is in planning.

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.havelbeenpwned.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 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

Cannabis continued to be the most commonly seized drug in Northern Ireland in 2022/23, followed by cocaine and benzodiazepines. In terms of real harm, opioids and benzodiazepines are the two drug types which pose the greatest health risks to users.

Quantities of heroin seized remained low in 2022/23 although the number of seizure incidents rose slightly from 2021/22.

During 2022/23, the number of seizures of cocaine and Pregabalin showed the highest increases from 2021/22. Despite the increase in the number of cocaine seizures, the total volume of cocaine seized reduced by almost 50% compared to 2021/22, with a higher proportion of lower weight seizures made.

Cannabis edibles are growing in popularity and availability. Cannabis edibles refers to cannabis infused food products, either homemade or produced commercially. They can take various forms, with the most popular being sweets, chocolate, cakes or brownies. They appear less harmful given their packaging and the form they are in, however it is reported that the slower rate of action, when compared to smoking the drug, invokes a tendency for users to over-consume before the cannabis takes effect. It is likely that younger and less experienced users of the target market will experience negative side effects and edibles have been linked to a number of hospitalisations.

Synthetic drugs are a significant growth area which are not fully represented in the current drugs seizure and arrest data. As availability, price and purity levels of controlled drugs change or vary, demand for synthetic alternatives may increase. A constantly evolving range of products, with different compositions and strengths resulting in unpredictable reactions, makes this an increasingly difficult area of drug misuse to tackle.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

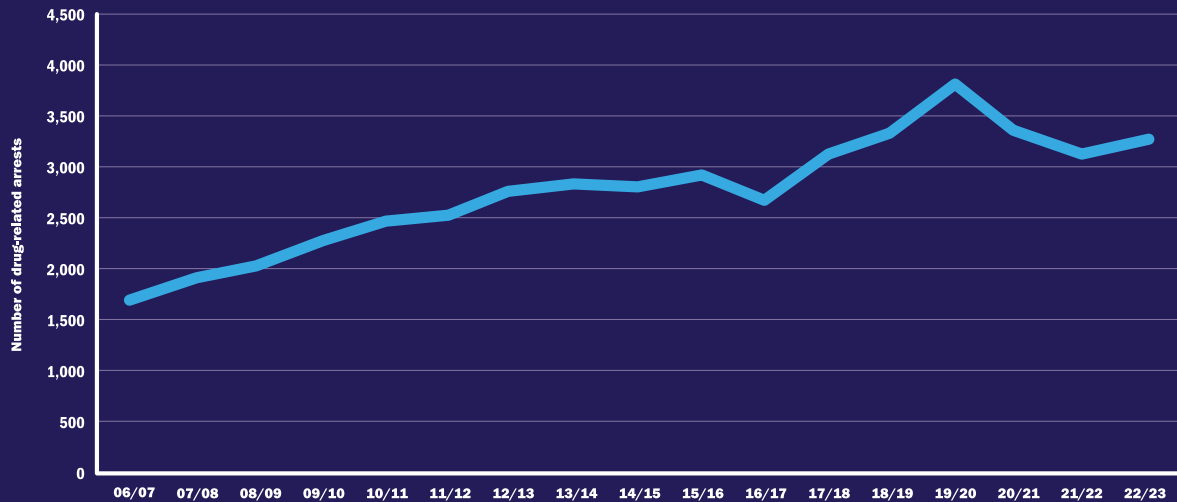
Op Dealbreaker

Op Dealbreaker was a joint Border Force/PSNI operation that targeted the numerous fast parcel depots across 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 of cannabis, per parcel. With vastly improved capability, Border Force is also able to detect intricate concealments within freight and Roll-on Roll-off (Ro-Ro) traffic.

Joint teams of Border Force Officers and Detectives from PSNI's Organised Crime supported by PSNI district officers and dog support visited the myriad of postal depots searching for illicit drugs, prescription medicines and any other illicit commodity. The operation was conducted over various phases during the year. The main purposes were to;

- detect, disrupt and seize illicit goods being moved through fast parcel depots;
- fill intelligence gaps around suspect importations by working proactively with other law enforcement agencies; and
- allow Border Force to target resources more effectively, in preventing and disrupting illicit movement of goods to enhance future similar activity.

Drug Related Arrests



During the period of this report there were **3,244 drug-related arrests**, an increase of **101 (3.3%)** when compared with the previous **12 months**. The latest figure remains nearly twice that recorded in **2006/07**.

Op Pangea

Op Pangea is an international initiative, led by Interpol, that concentrates on tackling the supply of illicit prescription medicines; this is a prime example of collaborative working between Departments and law enforcement agencies. A joint media event highlighted the operation as well as the risk to health of buying and taking medications bought online. Further details can be found in Chapter 5.

Link to press release below:

[Seizures of counterfeit and illicit online prescription medicines praised | Department of Justice \(justice-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/press-releases/seizures-of-counterfeit-and-illicit-online-prescription-medicines-praised)

Partnership Working

PSNI continues to work with partners locally and regionally to assist communities to build resilience against OCGs and the harm caused by illegal drugs supply in Northern Ireland.

PSNI Drugs Expert Witnesses continue to successfully resource the cannabis identification process, which has streamlined criminal justice outcomes for drug cases. Clinics are now running in Maydown and Lisnaskea and it is anticipated that eventually all Crime Scene Investigators (CSIs) will be trained to carry out these examinations. As a result of this, the turnaround time from request to examination will be greatly reduced.

This will also reduce the amount of time a person may be on police bail and allow for more timely submission of prosecution files.

In June 2022, Drugs Expert Witnesses attended a Continuing Professional Development day for members of the judiciary at the Royal Courts of Justice, Belfast. They delivered a presentation on drugs and current drug trends and the Judges present were given the opportunity to see and handle various types of drugs. This proved very useful and provided a perspective on the types of drugs involved in the offences they may be dealing with.

During the reporting period, a Drugs Expert Witness from Organised Crime Branch attended and completed a certified course in "Illicit Drug Laboratories". This course is approved by the Royal Society of Chemistry and the officer was the first from PSNI to attend and complete the course which provides officers with skills required to recognise and deal with hazards posed by the process, precursors and manufacture of drugs. The course also touched on and provided an overview of current threats and emerging trends within drug manufacturing, as well as guidance on best practice for "evidence recovery" and dismantling drug manufacturing sites/labs. The production of methamphetamine (commonly referred to as "crystal meth") is a highly dangerous process involving toxic chemicals.

Exposure to the chemicals released by the process is a major health risk and any mishandling of the product could lead to a serious explosion and loss of life, both in the premises and vicinity. It is therefore extremely important to have appropriately skilled officers to deal with this type of activity.

During this reporting period, Organised Crime Branch rolled out new Evidential Drugs Identification Test (EDIT) training to officers. This is a Home Office approved initiative which has the full support of the Lady Chief Justice and PPS and is aimed at speeding up criminal justice outcomes. This is an

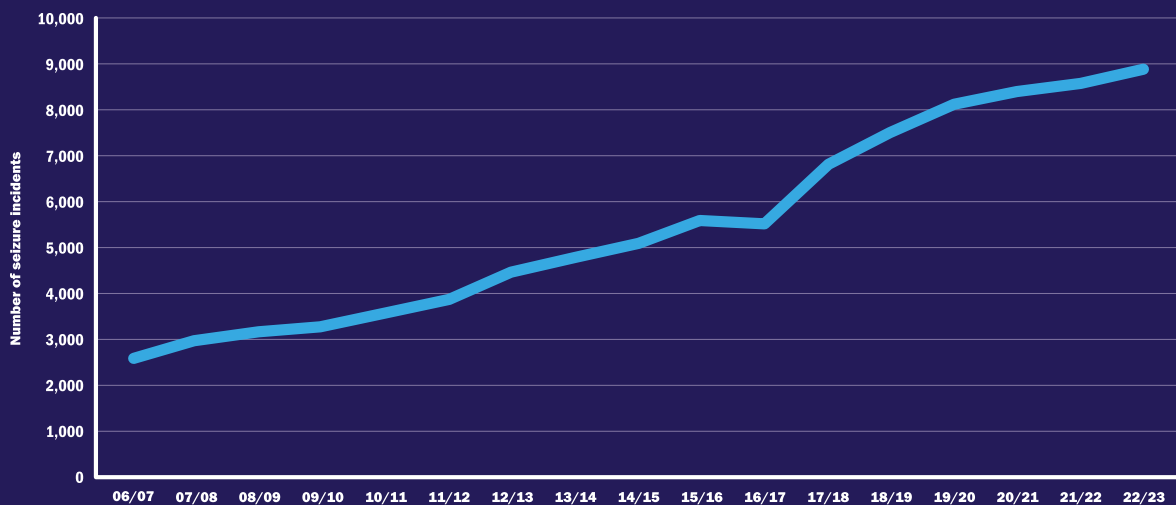
evidential test for suspected drugs which can be used to support charges in possession cases. As a result of this, quicker progress can be made during the custody process by saving time and footfall. This system is more efficient, negating the need for drugs to be sent elsewhere for testing and utilisation of the bail process. The first phase has concentrated efforts on Belfast and Antrim, however it is anticipated that the geographical spread will increase over time.

Naloxone is now approved for use by police officers in Belfast City. This is a nasal drug that can be used to reverse the side effects of opiate overdose.

RESULTS

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 2022/23



- During 2022/23, Organised Crime Branch seized drugs with an estimated street value of over £9 million.
- The demand for illicit drugs remains high and is increasing in Northern Ireland, as evidenced by general upward trends in seizure incidents, drug-related arrests and the proportion of clients receiving support for drug misuse, over half of whom indicated daily drug use in 2022/23.
- The number of drug seizure incidents has increased each year since 2006/07, with the exception of a slight fall in 2016/17.
- The number of drug seizure incidents recorded in 2022/23 (8,933) showed an increase of 337 (3.9%) when compared with 2021/22 and is almost three and a half times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590).

- During the reporting period, 90.6% of all drug offences resulted in a formal or informal sanction outcome, such as charge, report, caution or community resolution notice.
- Belfast City Policing District regularly accounts for the largest number of drugs seizure incidents. During 2022/23, there were 2,851 drug seizure incidents in Belfast City. This is an increase of 325 (13%) on the previous 12 month period when 2,526 were recorded.
- The fast parcel and postal systems remain a threat for the importation of drugs into Northern Ireland with a growing number of purchases being made on the open and Dark Web. Importations are being made on a regular basis containing small amounts of drugs in an attempt to reduce chances of detection and any potential criminal justice consequences. Working with partners in Border Force and National Crime Agency, PSNI continues to tackle this persistent and growing issue and intercept packages of suspected drugs destined for addresses in Northern Ireland.

Drug seizures³ by class and drug type

Drug class	Drug type	Drug seizure incidents		
		Apr 21-Mar 22	Apr 22-Mar 23	change
Class A	Cocaine	1,261	1,495	234
	Ecstasy	116	96	-20
	Heroin	133	150	17
	LSD	26	20	-6
	Methadone	7	11	4
	Morphine	15	17	2
	Other Class A	89	92	3
	All Class A	1,577	1,797	220
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	5,466	5,456	-10
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	140	250	110
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	97	65	-32
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	702	694	-8
	Total cannabis	6,014	6,072	58
	Amphetamines	109	102	-7
	Mephedrone	3	4	1
	Other Class B	230	227	-3
All Class B	6,198	6,249	51	
Class C	Anabolic steroids	39	47	8
	Benzodiazepines	1,204	1,139	-65
	Gabapentin	45	86	41
	Pregabalin	807	1,053	246
	Other Class C	211	247	36
	All Class C	1,921	2,101	180
All drugs	8,596	8,933	337	

3 Trends in Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland 2006/07 to 2022/23 (PSNI) - published 28 September 2023

ADDITIONAL SEIZURES

Border Force Seizures

- 227 kg of controlled drugs (Class A & B)
- 216,000 illicit prescription tablets

National Crime Agency Seizures

- 21 kg of Cocaine
- 48 kg of Cannabis

CASE STUDY - PSNI

CANNABIS FACTORY IN HILLSBOROUGH

During February 2023, Detectives from the Organised Crime Branch, assisted by colleagues in District Support Team and local Neighbourhood policing teams, arrested two men following the discovery of a large cannabis farm at a property in Hillsborough, County Down. The seized drugs had an estimated street value of £500,000. The two men, aged 35 and 39, were both later charged to Lisburn Magistrates Court for numerous drug-related offences including cultivating cannabis. This was a large and sophisticated cannabis farm which required searches by specialist police teams due to the size and set up. Police seized a number of items for further examination, including a large quantity of suspected cannabis.



Photo of a cannabis farm

CASE STUDY - PSNI

CANNABIS SEIZED IN BELFAST AND MID AND EAST ANTRIM

During January 2023, Detectives from Organised Crime Branch arrested two men aged 30 and 57 for drugs offences including possession of Class B drugs with intent to supply and attempting to import a controlled drug. Both men were charged and remanded into custody. During the arrests and follow up searches, approximately 5 kg of cannabis was seized, with a potential street value of £125,000. Searches were conducted at six premises across Belfast and Mid and East Antrim and a number of items were seized. This investigation is linked to an ongoing investigation into drugs criminality which has been ongoing for eight months. During this time, over 156 kg of Class B drugs were seized by officers from Border Force, the Metropolitan Police and Leicestershire Police with a potential street value of £2.4 million.



Photo of seized drugs

CASE STUDY - PSNI

500KG + DRUGS DESTROYED

In September 2022, officers from Organised Crime Branch destroyed drugs with a combined weight of 547 kg, including heroin, cocaine and prescription drugs. The seized drugs were recovered from streets and communities across Northern Ireland.

CASE STUDY - PSNI

NORTHUMBRIA POLICE IN CO-ORDINATED OPERATION

During February 2023, officers from Operational Support department stopped a vehicle in South Belfast. A search of the vehicle was conducted and approximately 14 kg of herbal cannabis with an estimated street value of £300,000 was recovered. The 43 year old male occupant of the vehicle was arrested for the offences of possession of Class B controlled drugs and possession of Class B drugs with intent to supply. Police later charged him to Lagside Magistrates Court. This was part of a coordinated operation between Organised Branch and Northumbria Police which has resulted in the arrest of nine people, five of whom were arrested in Northern Ireland. So far, in excess of 50 kg of herbal cannabis has been seized which has an estimated street value in excess of £1 million.

CASE STUDY - PSNI

INDIVIDUAL ADMITS INVOLVEMENT IN DRUGS AND PROCEEDS OF CRIME OFFENCES

During March 2023, a 52 year old man was sentenced at Londonderry Crown Court to an 11 year custodial sentence, having admitted offences including converting criminal property and involvement in drugs transactions. He was described by the Court as the leader of an OCG involved in supplying illegal drugs and was sentenced to seven and a half years for one series of offences and three and a half years consecutively for a second set of offences. Six other members of the gang received suspended sentences ranging from 12 months to three years. Among them was a 41-year-old woman who admitted offences linked to the proceeds of crime.

The 52 year old male admitted proceeds of crime charges involving £405,211 spent on Rolex watches and jewellery and almost £130,000 on holidays. He also admitted to being involved in a series of drug transactions including one where a car was stopped and cannabis and cocaine were found worth an estimated £700,000.

The court heard that the offending came to light after police stopped vehicles carrying "significant quantities of drugs together with large sums of money" in 2016 and 2017. They included a car in Omagh containing cannabis worth approximately £100,000 and a lorry stopped in Armagh in which £200,000 and €224,000 (£196,000) in cash was found.

CASE STUDY

CANNABIS FOUND HIDDEN IN WARDROBE IN A VEHICLE

In October 2022, Detectives from Organised Crime Branch, working alongside Belfast Harbour Police, conducted an operation in the Belfast Harbour area. A vehicle was stopped and searched and approximately 27 kg of cannabis seized, with an estimated street value of £400,000. The cannabis had been concealed within a wardrobe inside the vehicle. A sum of cash was also seized during the operation. A 33-year-old man was arrested and later charged to Laganside Magistrates Court with possession of a Class B controlled drug with intent to supply.



Image shows cannabis, concealed in a wardrobe, seized by officers from Organised Crime Branch

CASE STUDY

CANNABIS FOUND IN DIVAN BEDS IN A VEHICLE

During December 2022, Detectives from Organised Crime Branch, supported by Border Force and Belfast Harbour Police, conducted an operation in the Belfast Harbour area. A vehicle was stopped and searched, which led to a quantity of suspected cannabis being seized, with an estimated street value of £1 million. The cannabis had been vacuum packed and concealed within divan beds inside the vehicle. A 33-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of possession of a Class B controlled drug and possession of a Class B controlled drug with intent to supply. The man was later charged to appear at Laganside Magistrates Court.

This search, seizure and arrest was conducted as part of PSNI's ongoing commitment to address the criminality linked to drug importation, supply and use that often results in drug debts, drug addiction and drug-related deaths in communities.



Image shows seized drugs, concealed inside divan beds

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

15 KG CANNABIS SEIZED

This was as a result of a referral from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at George Best City Airport. A Malaysian national who started his journey in Malaysia arrived at the City Airport. On searching his bag Border Force found 15 kg of cannabis. The man was arrested, cautioned and transported to Musgrave St Police Station.

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

47.57 KG KHAT SEIZED

Following another referral from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 47.57 kg of Khat, a Class C controlled drug, was seized within various packages at a parcel depot in Belfast. This was being imported from Africa and destined for an address in South Belfast. The drugs were seized and subsequently destroyed.

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

6,600 CANNABIS-INFUSED GUMMIES

Recent cannabis seizures have also highlighted the continued growing trend of cannabis-infused sweets. These are often packaged in bright colours with cartoon figures and could be easily mistaken for regular confectionery, particularly appealing to children. If they fell into the hands of unsuspecting children this could have disastrous consequences. 6,600 cannabis infused gummies were seized, contained within a parcel sent from North America. The parcel was declared as "herbal" and the seizure referred to PSNI.



Photo of cannabis-infused gummies

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

72,000 XANAX TABLETS

72,000 Benzodiazepines were seized within a large package, sent from India going to an address in North Belfast. Seizure adopted for prosecution by PSNI.

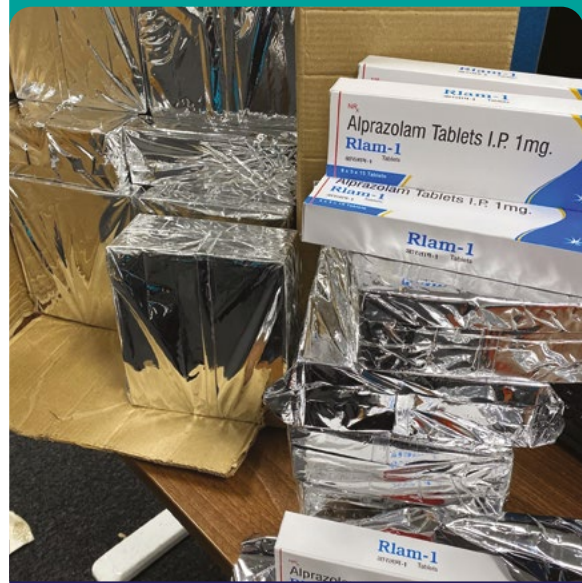


Photo of Benzodiazepines

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

20,000 ZOPICLONE TABLETS

20,000 Zopiclone tablets were seized within a package, sent from India going to an address in South Armagh. Seizure adopted for prosecution by PSNI.



Photo of Zopiclone tablets seized by Border Force.

CASE STUDY - BORDER FORCE

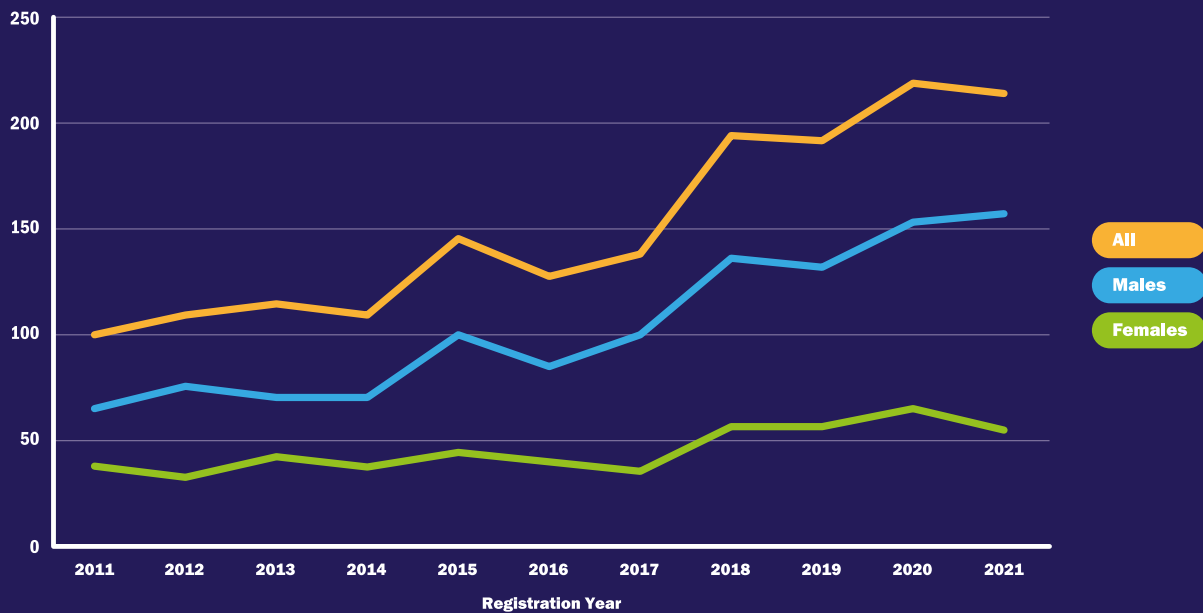
16.2 KG ANABOLIC STEROIDS/STEROIDS IN DIFFERENT FORMS

Over 16 kg of various steroids from growth hormone to erectile dysfunction tablets were seized within packages sent from India. These products are unlicensed and unsafe.



Photo of various illicit steroid medications.

Drug-Related deaths by registration year and sex



Drug-Related Deaths⁴

In November 2022, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) released the most up to date official figures for drug-related deaths covering the 2021 calendar year. These figures were reviewed in December 2022 to reflect the outcome of the review of Northern Ireland suicide statistics. The impact of the revisions was minimal as there was no change to trends or headlines.

- The number of drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2021 (213) was the second highest on record, five less than the 2020 peak of 218 deaths. The same was true for drug-misuse deaths, decreasing from a high of 182 in 2020 to a second highest total of 175 in 2021.
- Almost three-quarters (73.7%) of drug-related deaths in 2021 were accounted for by males.
- Drug-related death rates were highest among the 25-34 age group (26.9 deaths per 100,000 people).
- Opioids are consistently the most commonly mentioned type of drugs on death certificates, mentioned in 59.2% of drug-related deaths. However, the number of drug-related deaths involving psychoactive substances increased notably from 51 in 2020 to 73 in 2021.
- The number of drug-related deaths where alcohol was also mentioned increased from 30 in 2020 to 46 in 2021.
- Over two-thirds (68.1%) of drug-related deaths in 2021 involved two or more drugs. In contrast in 2011, 52.9% of drug-related deaths involved two or more drugs.
- As is evidenced above, poly drug use (the mixing of multiple drug types) and the misuse of prescription medication continues to be a prominent feature of many drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland. The risks from this practice are increasing, as shown by a rise in the number of drug-related deaths with two or more drugs mentioned on the death certificate.
- Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and Belfast Local Government District had the highest age-standardised rate of drug-related deaths per 100,000 population, i.e. 19.2 and 21.1 respectively. Drug-related and drug-misuse deaths continued to be higher in areas of highest deprivation.

⁴ Drug-related and drug-misuse deaths in Northern Ireland 2021 (NISRA) – published 24 November 2022, revised 14 December 2022

FORWARD LOOK

PSNI will continue to work with partners at a regional, national and international level to improve understanding of current and emerging threats associated with illegal drugs in Northern Ireland and to limit the harm caused.

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.psnipolice.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

During 2022/2023, PSNI's Economic Crime Unit (ECU) continued to focus on the Prevent, Protect, Partnership and Pursue themes and have continued to support Organised Crime Branch and the wider organisation with their own investigations, providing advice and taking restraint and confiscation matters to court, as well as conducting their own investigations and providing internal and external engagement.

Fraud continues to pose a significant threat to individuals, businesses and the wider economy.

The threat associated with fraud continues to increase, with the nature of offending becoming increasingly enabled by the use of modern technology. Technological advances have reshaped the fraud landscape, creating greater opportunities for fraudsters, while simultaneously making fraud investigation more complex and introducing cross-jurisdictional challenges.

The National Financial Intelligence Bureau (NFIB) hold the official fraud figures for PSNI. For 2022/2023 a total of 2,562 frauds were reported to NFIB with total losses of £8.5 million.

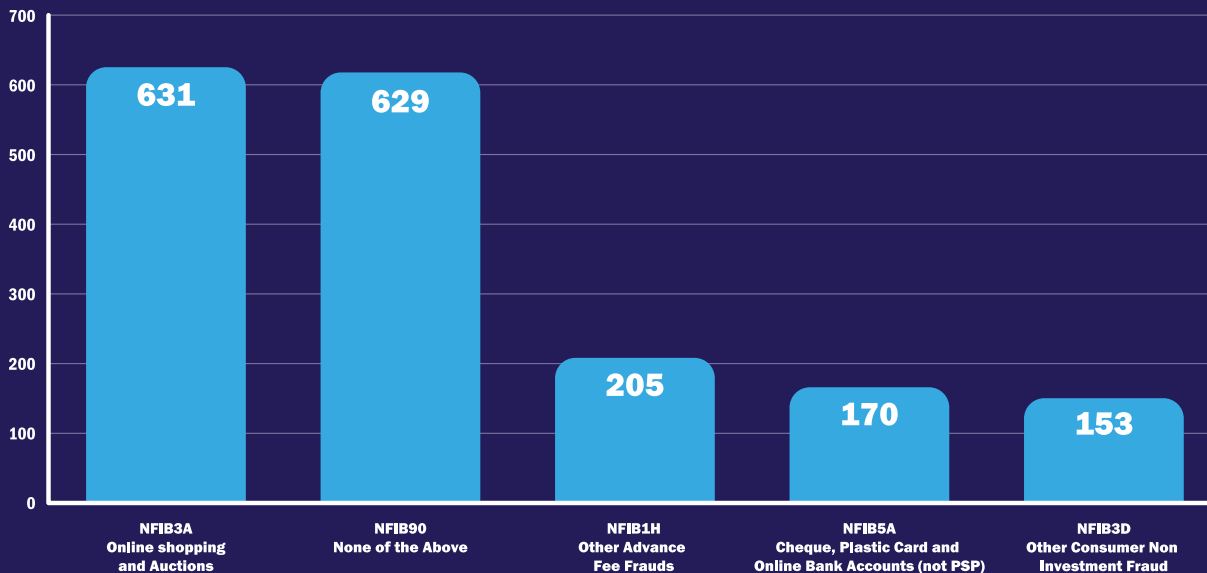
NUMBER OF REPORTS

2,562

REPORTED LOSSES

£8.5 Million

Top 5 Reported Crime Codes



The following fraud types continue to feature in the Northern Ireland profile:

- **Courier Fraud** – These are a cyclical problem that affect the most vulnerable in our society, in particular the elderly. The victim receives unsolicited contact from a person purporting to be from an official organisation, for example HMRC or PSNI. This contact frightens the victim into believing that they owe the organisation money and, if it is not paid urgently, they will be subject to arrest. The victim normally pays the offender using iTunes vouchers, again relying on the lack of knowledge of the victim. Recent variations of this fraud have seen elderly individuals contacted by persons claiming to be police officers who persuade the victim to leave cash or valuable jewellery in an envelope outside their door, which is then subsequently collected and stolen.
- **Bank Security Department Frauds** – The victim is contacted by the offender pretending to be their bank or a police officer investigating bank employees. They may provide information about the account which tricks the victim into believing they are actually speaking to their bank. The victim is told that they have been the target of fraud and that they need to move their money to a “safe account” quickly, but this account is actually a mule account controlled by the offender.
- **Sextortion** – these scams are a type of phishing attack whereby people are coerced to pay a ransom, usually by means of a virtual currency, because they have been threatened with sharing a video of themselves visiting adult websites or engaged in a sexual act. Many of the offenders involved in these offences are located overseas which provides barriers to investigation.
- **Invoice Redirection** – this remains a growing trend and traditionally entails contact made with a victim via email from a trusted source asking for payment to go to a new bank account. This type of fraud is affecting all sectors of business. The email can either appear to be spoofed from a trusted source or may involve the trusted source having their email system compromised. The money is then disbursed via a series of mule accounts, typically located in another police force area, which hinders the investigation.
- **Investment and Pension Fraud** – the threat posed by investment scammers continues to grow across the UK, with the most commonly reported scams involving opportunities for victims to invest in shares, bonds or cryptocurrencies.

Scammers traditionally make unexpected contact with the victim and use tactics such as time pressure, fake social proof to create the illusion of credibility by providing falsified or exaggerated endorsements and testimonials and outlining unrealistic returns on investment to encourage victims to transfer funds.

- **Cryptocurrency** – the majority of these cases are where the victim has invested in cryptocurrency, believing the scheme is backed by a high profile person such as Martin Lewis. The victim then invests money and when a return isn't received they are advised they need to pay more money to have the money returned.
- **Family WhatsApp fraud** which appeared heavily last year, has not been as common this year following an intensive media campaign.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Prevent

During the period of this report police have continued to engage with both Action Fraud and Scamwise to highlight emerging trends and scams which may pose a threat to either businesses, individuals or society. Economic Crime Unit has also made use of social media in order to raise public awareness around these matters.

CASE STUDY

HOLIDAY SCAMS IN DONEGAL

Fraud scams are often seasonal and in the first quarter of 2022/23 there were 19 holiday scams which were of significant interest. They involved adverts being placed on Facebook Marketplace for a holiday rental property in Donegal which did not exist. The seller, who used various names, convinced the victim to pay a deposit ranging from £100-£500 and requested that this be paid via PayPal Friends and Family or via bank transfer into online accounts such as Paynet Limited, Clearbank Limited and Revolut. Once the victim had sent the payment, they were blocked on Facebook Messenger and all communication ceased. These adverts remain on Facebook even though some of the victims have reported these scams to the online platform. Officers engaged with a range of media outlets across Northern Ireland to raise awareness of this scam at the time.

Holiday Scams

psni.police.uk 
Report online. Call 101. In an emergency call 999

we care
we listen
we act

 **Police Service**
of Northern Ireland

Screenshot from PSNI's website raising awareness of holiday scams.

- In September 2022 Economic Crime Unit (ECU) took an active role in Fresher's Week, in partnership with local Neighbourhood Policing Teams, Queens University Belfast and the Ulster University. ECU provided presentations on fraud, money mules and how students could avoid becoming the victims of fraud. It is hoped that this early engagement with students as they begin their university life will help prevent them being vulnerable to both scams and frauds. This was also repeated in January 2023 with a new student intake.
- In December 2022, there was an increase of reported courier fraud incidents in which an individual had impersonated a police officer during a telephone call, in order to obtain cash or valuables, usually targeting older members of the community. Officers responded quickly by immediately issuing an advisory campaign across various media platforms. There were no further reports of this nature following the release of this campaign and no losses were incurred in these cases.

Impersonation Scams

Criminals are contacting older people across Northern Ireland and claiming to be police officers

 we care . we listen . we act

Police Service of Northern Ireland 

Screenshot from PSNI's website highlighting need to be vigilant to impersonation scams.

Protect

During this period, officers from ECU engaged with a number of key partners both internally and externally to learn from best practice, support victims of crime, raise awareness of current fraudulent activity and to provide training.

ECU has a dedicated investigation team who continue to work on the investigation into Logan Wellbeing Clinic, a health, wellbeing and fertility clinic. The investigation team continue to progress multiple sensitive and complex lines of enquiry, working with partners within HMRC and the Department of Health. Resources were dedicated to this investigation to ensure it was progressed well and that all victims who had come forward felt supported.

ECU also dealt with a total of 62 requests for financial enquiries assistance to help with investigations into high risk missing persons in 2022/23. Financial enquiries of this nature can help identify if someone is alive, their whereabouts and identify other lines of enquiry to pursue and narrow down areas to explore and in many cases the expertise of a Financial Investigator has identified the location of a missing person, thereby assisting in their safe recovery.

Detectives from ECU continually seek to support police colleagues by raising awareness of how ECU can support investigations or by advising them of how to manage different aspects of fraud. For example, in October 2022, a presentation was delivered to Crime Department Detective Sergeants and Inspectors regarding the role of ECU, the Financial Toolkit, Financial Strategies, Money Laundering offences, Asset Recovery Tactics and how a Financial Investigator can support the various phases of investigation.

A 'Train the Trainer' session was also arranged with North Area District Trainers in relation to cash seizures, designed and intended to provide frontline officers with the core skills and knowledge required to carry out their role effectively.

Partnership

In excess of 57,000 individuals are registered blind or partially sighted in Northern Ireland. In October 2022 Detectives from ECU attended an event in Belfast City Centre to provide advice on how to avoid becoming a victim of fraud in partnership with the Strategic Community Engagement Team.

Detectives from the Economic Crime Unit also gave crime prevention advice on fraud, protecting yourself, sextortion and scammers impersonating police. This was delivered in conjunction with North Belfast Neighbourhood Policing Team at Mount Vernon Community Centre to groups from across North Belfast.

ECU continued to work in partnership with the Department for Communities and HMRC to develop a Prevent Strategy with regard to tackling offences connected to gambling, along with the harm caused to communities by these offences.

In January 2023, Antrim ECU, working in collaboration with Border Force and colleagues in the police, conducted a proactive operation at Belfast International Airport. With the assistance of two police dogs, they performed checks on outbound flights. Good engagement with the public was noted and relationships with outside agencies were enhanced.

In January 2023, Detectives from the ECU presented a cheque for over £100,000 to a local charity. The amount of £108,125 was raised, mainly through tackling illegal gambling and was presented to Inspire. Inspire is an all-island charity and social enterprise that provides recovery based mental health and addiction services in communities. Services include counselling, mutual aid partnerships, family support, floating support, advocacy and supported housing services. This was achieved in partnership with Wilson's Auctions.

In March 2023, officers attended the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) Spring Safety Event in Belfast City Hall and provided advice on fraud awareness.

RESULTS

Pursue

Specialist Restraint & Confiscators in Economic Crime Unit successfully obtained eight confiscation orders in relation to a variety of fraud, drug and money laundering offences. These totalled over £1 million.

Four restraint applications were made to the value of approximately £650,000.

Account Freezing Orders were introduced under the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and were utilised 17 times in 2022/23 by ECU, with a total value of approximately £271,000 with regard to drugs and money laundering offences. Economic Crime Unit use these orders to tackle illicit finance and suspected proceeds of crime. Account Freezing Orders are a powerful tool which allow police to take quick and effective action against illicit funds held in bank accounts by criminals who abuse the banking system to store and transfer the proceeds of their crime. Approximately half of the money forfeited will eventually go towards the Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme and will be reinvested for community initiatives as well as funding policing programmes to continue fighting crime.

Detectives in ECU focused on money mule investigations in February 2023 and interviewed 13 suspects for money laundering offences. A money mule is one of the most important enablers of fraud and the term is used to describe someone who lets another person use their bank account to send criminal money and, in return for doing so, are usually paid a small part of the money transferred. Offenders will commonly use social media sites to target and recruit people as money mules, with the promise of easy cash - which can be a tempting prospect. Once initial contact has been made, the money mule may be asked to open a bank account or hand over their own bank account details. The offender will then transfer a substantial amount of money into that account and the money mule will then usually transfer the money to another account. This process allows criminals to hide their proceeds of crime and make it harder for police to trace and locate. Whilst the money mule may only be partly aware of the criminal enterprise, as long as police can prove that they had some suspicion that something illegal was happening, they can still be prosecuted.

During 2022/23 ECU concentrated on training focused on widening capability to pursue offenders and increase the department's understanding of new legislation and powers. This included the following;

- 17 officers from ECU completed specialist fraud investigation training;
- six ECU members commenced training as Financial Investigators, widening the capability of ECU to explore lines of enquiry to pursue offenders. Training also took place online with the City of London Police; and
- internal training on the new Criminal Finances Act, Account Freezing Orders and listed assets, which will add value to PSNI's capacity to investigate, dismantle and disrupt criminal activity.

Other successes in 2022/2023 included;

- in July 2022, a 22 year old male was sentenced to seven months in custody and seven months on licence at Belfast Magistrates' Court for money laundering offences and fraud by abuse of position. He was also ordered to pay £3,800 in compensation to the victim;
- ECU took a case to court in August 2022 during which 10 offenders received custodial sentences for their role in a £21 million money laundering gang. An additional four people received suspended sentences due to their lesser involvement. This successful result came after a proactive and disruptive investigation; and
- in September 2022, a 42 year old male and a 40 year old female were convicted and sentenced for fraud, involving the chipping of pre-loaded android TV boxes that enable users to unlawfully access satellite TV streams online. This was reported in August 2017 and two suspects were identified. The investigation showed that the suspects had approximately £93,000 paid into their accounts from customers. The 42 year old male received a nine month custodial sentence and the 40 year old female received a one year sentence, suspended for three years.

- In October 2022, a 55 year old female was sentenced to two years imprisonment, suspended for three years, in relation to fraud by abuse of position to the value of £310,000.
- In December 2022, a 35 year old male received a six month sentence, suspended for two years, for theft from Danske Bank following an IT fault where customers were able to withdraw more than their account balance. The suspect withdrew approximately £25,000 from his account and failed to repay it.
- 18 people were sentenced for money laundering offences for their role as money mules. All received suspended sentences.
- In March 2023, a 32 year old Halifax bank

employee who had retained elderly customers' details and used these to steal money from their accounts, was convicted of three counts of fraud by abuse of position and sentenced to three six month terms of imprisonment to run concurrently. An email of appreciation from one of the victims of this fraud was received by ECU.

- Also in March 2023, a 44 year old male was sentenced in relation to fraud, by abuse of position, having defrauded the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) of £125,603.63 over a 12 year period. Postponement was granted to allow for confiscation and the male was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, suspended for three years.

Total cash and assets seized from criminals

Number and value of restraint orders, confiscation orders, cash seizures, account Freezing Orders (AFO) and Listed Assets (LA) & subsequent forfeiture

1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023		
	Quantity	Value
Restraint Orders	4	£650,000
Cash Seizures	132	£1,336,530
Listed Assets (LA)	7	£40,240
AFOs	24	£658,659
Total (Value)	167	£2,685,429
Confiscation Orders	8	£1,012,976
Cash Forfeitures	92	£1,038,365
LA Forfeitures	1	£1,492
AFO Forfeitures	2	£38,040
Total (Value)	103	£2,090,873

FORWARD LOOK

The Economic Crime Unit will continue to make use of the additional powers in the Criminal Finances Act to tackle criminal finances and associated organised crime in Northern Ireland.

The Economic Crime Unit will work collaboratively with partners and internal policing teams with the aim of increasing seizures and restraint of criminal assets.

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

Intellectual Property Crime (IPC) is a global crime trend worth an estimated £2.5 trillion annually – the equivalent of Spain and Australia’s economies combined. The sale of counterfeit and illicit goods may help to fuel further harm to communities and individuals through other forms of criminality, such as drug trafficking. Those involved in IPC are often linked to various forms of serious organised crime. The OCTF sub group on IPC has seen significant change in attendance and partner collaboration, particularly over the past financial year.

The scale and distribution of intellectual property crime continues to grow through the use of the internet, with goods frequently advertised for sale via social media, auction sites and online classifieds. There are also thousands of websites dedicated to the sale of counterfeit goods. While these websites often give the impression of being secure and trustworthy, by using these sites and providing their personal and banking details, consumers are leaving themselves open to becoming victims of identity fraud or having their devices compromised by malicious software and potentially used for further criminality.

The most common types of counterfeit goods regularly seized in Northern Ireland include clothing, alcohol, tobacco, cosmetics, sunglasses, handbags, footwear, DVDs, CDs and electrical items. As a result of the current cost of living crisis, there is the potential for a rise in counterfeit foodstuffs as people find it more challenging to make ends meet.

The issue of Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) remains one of the main intellectual property crime concerns in Northern Ireland. Rising costs of subscription TV and streaming services are encouraging more people to turn to these illegal services. The current cost of living crisis has the potential to entice more people to look to illegal services. Using these services places individuals at high risk of being hacked and having their details stolen and as such this may result in higher levels of fraud and online crime.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

In March and April 2023, three police officers conducted a research project across Cardiff, Coventry, Manchester and London. This included visits to the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), Border Force at major postal hubs, North West Regional Organised Crime Unit, Police Intellectual Property Crime Unit and Sky. The learning and best practice from these experienced partners has been key to enhancing the knowledge of these officers which translates into practical guides and support internally. PSNI continues to work with partners to continually increase the resource, improve response and knowledge in tackling IPC.

Working in an environment of significantly reduced resources and budget, a focus on the IPC Prevent strategy has seen engagement and collaboration with the IPO and other partners, to maximise use of education and information campaigns to demonstrate the threat, risk and harm of purchasing IPC goods. Enforcement remains a substantial undertaking, but one which has experienced a momentum change with positive results.

Education and support for those undertaking enforcement is crucial. Partners across government and industry assisted police in conducting a two day training event in Londonderry and Belfast in November 2022. The aim of the training was to bring awareness of the nature of IPC to a wide range of police officers, staff and partner colleagues.

A marked increase in referrals to PSNI has been noted, with investigations triaged by a small cohort of officers who distribute the work to the most appropriate policing resource. There has also been an uplift in use of the internal police IPC email address, with officers requesting assistance following detections of IP related offences. Partners continue to assist the police in understanding the scale of IPC in Northern Ireland and assist us in identifying key offenders.

TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE

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.

During the reporting period, TSS worked proactively 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.
- The National Trading Standards Team in conjunction with the US Federal Trade Commission investigated worldwide mass scam mail. Households, including those in Northern Ireland, were targeted with alleged 'cash wins' and 'guaranteed cash pay-outs' asking recipients to send on average between £25 - £40 to claim their prize (some victims responded numerous times). Over 100 people in Northern Ireland fell victim to this scam. Action was taken in 2018 against the scammers resulting in \$25 million being made available to compensate victims around the world. In 2022, over £10,000 was returned to over 65 victims in Northern Ireland with an average of £165 delivered to victims at a time when households were experiencing a cost of living crisis. Two victims from Northern Ireland received over £1000. You can read more at [Northern Ireland victims of international mass marketing scam to be compensated | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- 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.
- 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.

HERO AWARD

Helping scam victims earns Hero Award for Northern Ireland Trading Standards Enforcement Officer

[Helping scam victims earns Hero Award for Northern Ireland Trading Standards Enforcement Officer | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Alison Gilchrist, Northern Ireland's Lead Officer on Doorstep Crime and Scams, has received the Trading Standards Hero Award from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) for her tireless work in safeguarding victims and potential victims of scams and rogue traders, resulting in savings of over £1 million.



Alison Gilchrist from Trading Standards receiving her Chartered Trading Standards Institute Hero Award

DOORSTEP CRIME

Doorstep crime affects a large volume of consumers across Northern Ireland and is a priority work area for Trading Standards. This type of crime is often aimed at elderly and vulnerable consumers. Doorstep crime is considered as being “low risk” to many criminals, has appeal to Organised Crime Groups (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 the 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 get over 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.

Protecting vulnerable people from doorstep crime is a key priority for TSS. 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. Doorstep crime builds up a degree of mistrust with a knock-on impact being felt by the legitimate trade.

TSS has worked hard 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 the National Trading Standards' Doorstep Crime Campaign, organised in conjunction with Friends Against Scams.

[Say no to doorstep crime | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#); 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

SCAMS

TSS was made aware by PSNI officers that a lady had lost £90,000 in an online romance scam. The victim sent thousands of pounds of gift cards to scammers. The lady was contacted through a social media site and over a period of six months the scammer convinced her that they would set up a new life together. The lady borrowed money from both family and friends in order to send money to the scammer. A visit by TSS officers discovered the lady was continuing to send gift cards to the scammers despite previously being advised that this was a scam. TSS officers have spent many hours providing advice and support to the victim eventually persuading her not to send any further money or gift cards.

TSS was contacted by a man who lost nearly £200,000 after making fake investments in oil and natural gas. He used £75,000 of his own money and obtained loans totalling £119,000 to make further investments. The scammer allowed the victim to withdraw a small amount of money from the fake trading platform to give the illusion that this was a genuine investment. TSS assisted the man in raising a complaint with his bank and then to the Financial Ombudsman Service resulting in £139,000 being returned to him after his complaint was upheld.

TSS was contacted by a man that had lost a six figure sum to a cryptocurrency scam. This was his life savings and entire pension, having recently retired. The scam victim tried to get help from his bank and various organisations but had no success. He then contacted Consumerline (TSS advice helpline) in some considerable distress. A TSS Officer then quickly made contact with him to provide initial support and advice. He was unaware that he could take his case to the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS) after the bank repeatedly resisted any claims that they were liable for any of the losses.

With assistance from TSS, the complainant took his case to the FOS. His claim was twice denied by the adjudicator before going on appeal to the Ombudsman. FOS upheld his complaint, in part, and instructed the bank to pay him back most of the money he had lost. **Cryptocurrency scam: Man swindled out of pension and life savings - BBC News**

TSS was contacted by a man who lost £37,500 in a cryptocurrency scam. He initially invested £2,500 of his own money however scammers gained remote access to his computer and subsequently took out £35,000 in loans in his name. He was advised by TSS to raise a complaint with his bank and they have since returned £25,000.

Doorstep crime key threats and emerging issues:

- Internet/social media continues 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.
- Infiltration by rogue traders into approved trader schemes and use of professional website developers, often using fake reviews, so they appear genuine, reputable traders.
- Criminal business practices continue to include property improvements and maintenance work especially roofing and gardening services.

CASE STUDY

ROGUE TRADER FAILS TO HONOUR HIS PROMISED 10-YEAR GUARANTEE WITH THE WORK FOUND TO BE SUBSTANDARD AND UNSAFE

A rogue trader visited three homeowners who paid for home improvement work totalling £87,500. All three victims believed that the building work would follow with a 10-year guarantee with no upfront payments due until the work was completed to their satisfaction. Work commenced at all three properties and within days large upfront payments were requested. At two of the properties, retaining walls were built and, following an inspection, they were deemed unsafe and later removed. At the third property, a sunroom was constructed that required so much remedial work that its demolition was the only economically viable option. The roof was replaced but it leaked so badly it had to be remedied by the homeowner at a further cost of £18,000. The trader pleaded guilty to offences under the Fraud Act 2006 and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008, receiving an eighteen-month sentence suspended for three years.

CASE STUDY

ROGUE TRADER WHO OFFERED 20-YEAR GUARANTEE LEFT VICTIMS WITH LARGE BILLS TO HAVE WORK COMPLETELY RE-DONE

A roofer visited two homes in the Lisburn and Antrim areas. In Lisburn, he advised the homeowner that a full roof replacement was required. When the roof was stripped of tiles, he inflated the cost of the work leaving the victim with no other option than to pay the inflated price. The roof began to leak within days of the work being finished and when an attempt was made to contact the trader to exercise the promised guarantee, he simply ignored the calls. An independent survey concluded that the entire roof should be stripped back and totally replaced costing the homeowner an additional £5,190 in repairs.

At the second property in Antrim, an elderly couple agreed to have roofing work completed. When the work commenced, the cost was again inflated leaving the couple with no option but to pay. Within a short time of the work being finished, the roof leaked worse than ever before causing issues with the electrics in their home. When the trader failed to return and honour his promised guarantee the couple were left with no option but to pay another contractor £11,000 for remedial work. The trader pleaded guilty to offences under the Fraud Act and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 and received a five-month sentence suspended for two years.

CASE STUDY

LURGAN TRADER ORDERED TO PAY £10,000 COMPENSATION FOR SUBSTANDARD WORK AND MISLEADING CONSUMERS

A Lurgan trader was ordered to pay compensation of £10,000 to a victim for failing to complete external construction work to the victim's home to a satisfactory standard. The victim engaged the services of the trader having obtained his contact details through an online platform. The victim was initially quoted £8,000. However, an additional £4,500 was soon requested. The victim reluctantly paid the £12,500; but it quickly became apparent that the work was substandard and flawed. The trader pleaded guilty to five charges under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. The trader was given a conditional discharge, suspended for two years and ordered to pay £10,000 in compensation.

Online Market Places

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

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;
- footwear;
- car accessories;
- electrical items;
- confectionary
- designer watches; and
- alcohol.

TSS worked with companies advising on their websites and product offerings to ensure the traders are aware of their legal obligations and that they do not offer counterfeit goods for sale.

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



Self-Storage Industry and the Tick Box. Keep it Real. Keep it Legal

TSS launched the **Tick Box. Keep it Real. Keep it Legal** code of practice in Northern Ireland. This is a partnership initiative between TSS and the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), supported by the Self-Storage Association UK. The aim is to raise industry standards and awareness in order to prevent the storage of counterfeit and illicit goods, reduce the appeal of self-storage facilities to criminals and increase engagement between the industry, Trading Standards and other law enforcement agencies.

The benefits to traders who sign up to the code of practice include:

- the use of the code of practice logo marketing material to promote a commitment to fair trading and consumer protection;
- provision of staff training material;
- business details will be added to the code of practice website which is promoted by the IPO and TSS – <https://tick-box.org.uk/>; and
- the code helps to prevent the use of facilities by criminals;

To date approximately 10% of self-storage companies in Northern Ireland have engaged with TSS and signed up to the scheme.

FORWARD LOOK

OCTF partners will continue to increase their engagement and improve their understanding of Intellectual Property Crime to tackle this criminality that generates significant profits and funds further organised crime. This includes training days at various locations in Northern Ireland with colleagues from the Intellectual Property Office, Trading Standards Service, partners from industry and subject experts.

Work will continue to build on engagement with partners who provide expert evidence, including the utilisation of training to identify and tackle counterfeit and illicit goods to complement organised crime investigations.

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

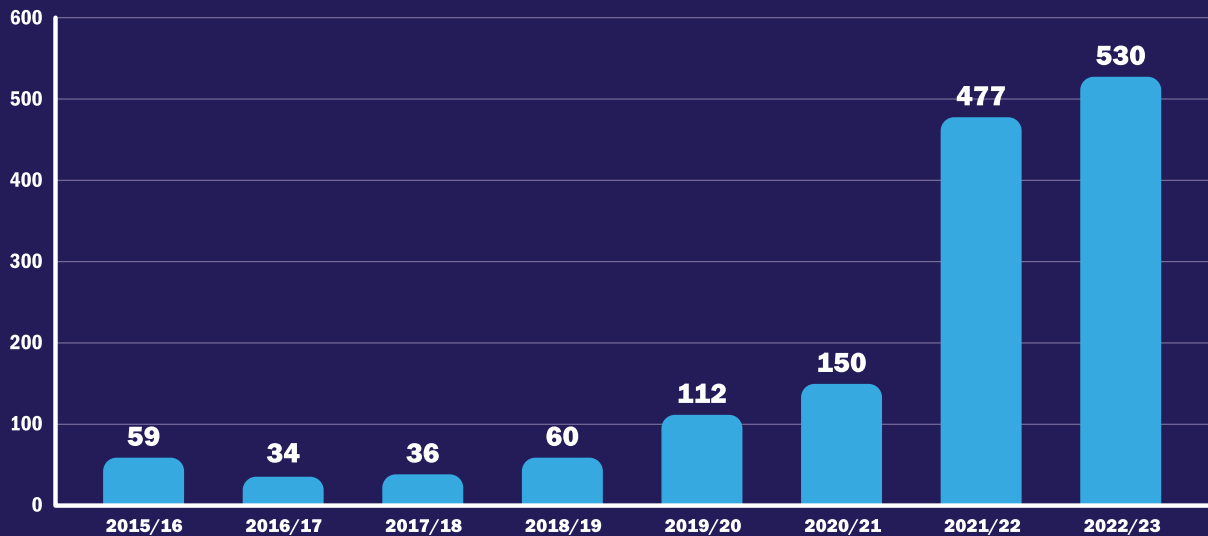
THE THREAT

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 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 National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK-wide framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. The number of MSHT offences and the number of potential victims identified through the NRM increased by 11% during 2022/23.

NRM Referrals



The graph above shows the continued increase of NRM referrals in recent years.

It is important to clarify that total NRM figures are a combination of potential victims who have either been exploited in Northern Ireland or overseas. Of the 530 potential victims referred during 2022/23, 35 claimed that the exploitation occurred within Northern Ireland, while the remaining 495 involved claims of exploitation occurring in other countries.

This is compared to 35 potential victims exploited in Northern Ireland during 2021/22, with the remaining 442 referrals involving exploitation overseas. Therefore, while the overall NRM referrals have significantly increased, the scale of exploitation within Northern Ireland has remained consistent. The main increase is attributed to NRM referrals involving exploitation outside of Northern Ireland.

In terms of exploitation specific to Northern Ireland, the most common referred type of exploitation encountered was labour followed by sexual exploitation. Adult Services Websites remained a key enabler for sexual exploitation.

The total 530 NRM referrals can be broken down as follows:

- 310 male adults (30 alleged exploitation when they were children)
- 200 female adults (27 alleged exploitation when they were children)
- 16 males aged under 18 years
- Four females aged under 18 years
- A total of 28 different nationalities
- 339 referrals for alleged labour exploitation
- 87 referrals for alleged sexual exploitation
- 18 referrals for alleged domestic servitude
- Eight referrals in relation to securing services (where the person has been subjected to force, threats, abduction, coercion, fraud or deception)
- 30 referrals for both labour and sexual exploitation
- 48 recorded as “unknown”

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

PSNI's approach to human trafficking is victim centred, with the need to identify, locate and recover any Potential Victims of Trafficking and offer the potential victims police help and support. PSNI also focuses on tackling OCGs involved and detain or detect people involved in the trafficking of people.

As part of the wider approach to raise awareness and skills of those who will encounter victims first, PSNI's MSHT Unit have delivered a programme of activity that includes:

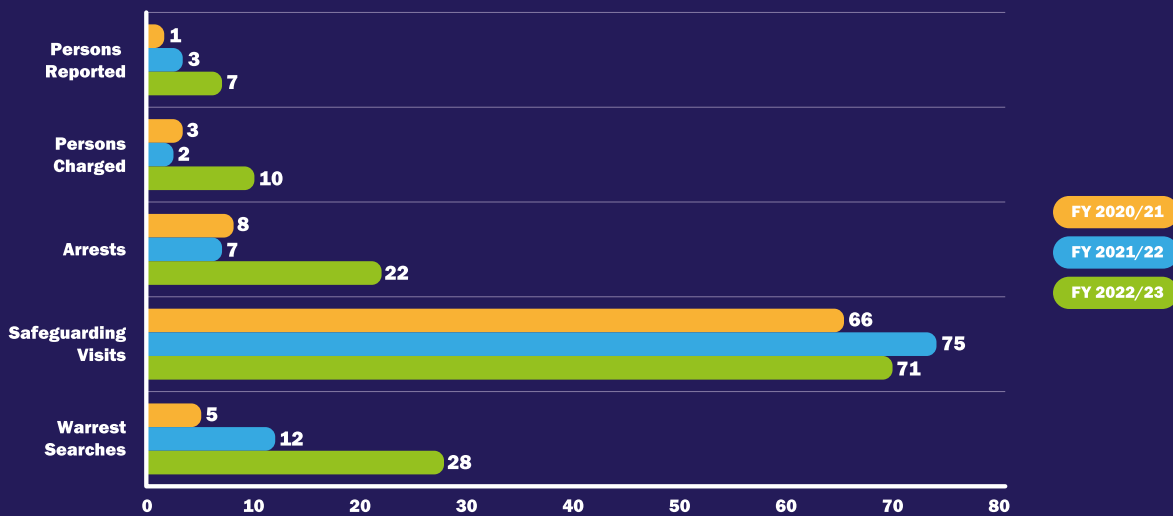
- Development of an online learning module on MSHT. To date, in excess of 7,200 police officers and staff have completed this training package.
- In addition, 70 officers have received specialist College of Policing accredited training in relation to MSHT. These officers work within a variety of departments across PSNI and provide advice and guidance to colleagues.

- Detectives from the MSHT Unit also delivered training to a number of public and private sector group, including medical students at Queens University Belfast and to staff in Simon Community accommodation across Northern Ireland.
- Detectives from the MSHT Unit created training materials, 'First Responder Training', which includes the NRM, Northern Ireland Legislation and how to spot the signs and indicators of modern slavery and recent case studies. This training has been delivered to all student officers during initial training in the Police College and also to all newly qualified Detectives. The delivery of training to student officers is a joint presentation with local charity No More Traffick, that has recently merged with international non-government organisation, Hope for Justice. Training has also been delivered to officers in Road Policing Units and to call handling departments.

RESULTS

During 2022/23 PSNI saw a continued increase in the demand for the services of the MSHT Unit compared to 2021/22. The numbers of people charged increased by 400%, the number of individuals reported increased by 133%, the numbers arrested increased by 214% and the number of searches conducted increased by 133%.

MSHT Unit



During 2022/23, PSNI's MSHT Unit achieved the following;

- 102 screening assessments (a process to safeguard victims through early recognition and subsequent intervention);
- 28 warrant searches and 71 safeguarding visits/non-warrant operations. These safeguarding visits were conducted across a range of sectors, including the sex industry, agriculture, nail bars and car washes. 20 of these safeguarding visits were conducted with partner agencies such as Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Home Office Immigration Enforcement, HMRC and Border Force;
- 22 arrests for MSHT and/or related offences.
- ten people charged with MSHT and/or related offences; and
- seven people reported to PPS for MSHT and/or related offences.

CASE STUDY

FIRST CONVICTION FOR FORCED LABOUR

During June 2022, a Nigerian man aged 36 and a Nigerian woman aged 28 were both sentenced at Belfast Crown Court to two years imprisonment, suspended for two years, for requiring a person to perform forced labour. This is the first conviction for forced or compulsory labour in Northern Ireland. They were both also ordered to pay their victim £10,000 in compensation. The victim, a young Nigerian woman, lived in this couple's home for over a year, where she was forced to work in excess of 14 hours a day, seven days a week performing all the domestic chores and minding their children. She was not paid for this work and in return, only £20 per month was sent to her family in Nigeria. The investigation revealed the level of control the man and woman had over the victim, who was particularly vulnerable due to a learning disability. The investigation was assisted by colleagues from the National Crime Agency (NCA), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and prosecutors from PPS.

CASE STUDY

MAN JAILED FOR TRAFFICKING YOUNG LOCAL WOMEN

In July 2022, a man aged 59, was sentenced to five years imprisonment for trafficking 12 young local women throughout Northern Ireland for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This followed his guilty plea to 28 charges relating to the 12 female victims. A Slavery Trafficking Prevention Order was also issued and will be in place for seven years. The man was initially arrested on suspicion of human trafficking, controlling prostitution and money laundering and was later further arrested on suspicion of voyeurism, brothel-keeping and paying for sexual services. Officers from PSNI's Organised Crime Branch worked closely with a range of partners including the Department of Justice, An Garda Síochána (AGS), NCA, PPS and other agencies represented on OCTF.

CASE STUDY

SEXUAL OFFENCES AND TRAFFICKING OFFENCE

In September 2022, as part of an ongoing proactive operation, officers from Organised Crime Branch arrested and charged a 69 year old man to Laganside Magistrates' Court for several offences including human trafficking, rape, controlling prostitution for gain, aiding and abetting sexual assault, perverting the course of justice and being concerned in the supply of a Class A controlled drug. The man is a remand prisoner, having been previously charged with 17 offences in relation to the same investigation. The victims were all young local women who were vulnerable by virtue of drug addiction, mental health issues and socio-economic factors. The man is alleged to have preyed on these young women, initially grooming them and providing them with drugs in exchange for sexual services for both himself and others.

In February 2023, officers from Organised Crime Branch again arrested and later charged this man to court for several offences in relation to further victims including human trafficking, rape and being concerned in the supply of a Class A controlled drug. This investigation remains ongoing.

CASE STUDY

TRAFFICKING PEOPLE FOR EXPLOITATION - MAN DEPORTED

In February 2023, Craigavon Crown Court sentenced a 40 year old male to serve a week in custody after he pleaded guilty and was convicted of knowingly entering the UK in breach of a deportation order. He will be deported from the UK by the Home Office at a later date. The male was previously sentenced to a total of three years and nine months after pleading guilty to a number of offences dating back to 2014. The offences included five counts of trafficking persons into the UK for exploitation, conspiring to traffic persons within the UK for exploitation, acting as an unlicensed gangmaster and converting criminal property in 2016. He was also given a deportation order and was deported from the UK.

Following reports from the local community that he was back in the area, an investigation by specialist human trafficking investigators, along with Home Office Immigration Enforcement and PSNI's Roads Policing Unit led to the arrest of this male. This combined effort has removed a person of concern from the local community.

CASE STUDY

PEOPLE TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

During November 2022, Detectives from Organised Crime Branch supported by over 150 officers from across the organisation as well as criminal justice partners, carried out a significant operation into an OCG which had been involved in trafficking people throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for sexual exploitation. The operation was supported by partners in An Garda Síochána (AGS), Home Office Immigration Enforcement, NCA and PPS.

A 62 year old man and a 47 year old female were arrested and later charged to appear at Dungannon Court for the offences of human trafficking, brothel keeping, controlling prostitution and money laundering. Both have since been remanded into custody by the court. A further 37 year old female was arrested and has since been released on police bail pending further enquiries. Police believe the victims were targeted because of their immigration status and lack of English language skills. Officers visited 27 brothels across Northern Ireland to engage with potential victims of trafficking and offered support and protection to the victims. Most of the individuals encountered were from a number of other countries including Spain, Brazil, Portugal, Romania, Thailand and Kenya.



D/Chief Superintendent Andy Hill said the victims were targeted because of their immigration status and lack of English language skills



The searches took place in towns and cities across Northern Ireland

Operation AIDANT

PSNI continue to support the Modern Slavery Police Transformation Programme and the NCA's Operation AIDANT. This ongoing operation involves weeks of intensification activities around a particular area of exploitation in which the police participate alongside law enforcement colleagues across Great Britain. During the reporting period the MSHT Unit took part in several periods of AIDANT activity.

As an example of safeguarding activity conducted during AIDANT in August 2022, officers from Organised Crime Branch partnered with Border Force officers at Belfast City Airport as part of Operation AIDANT.

The focus for this phase of AIDANT was high sophistication offending and sexual exploitation, particularly in relation to potential victims entering the UK. It is known that many victims who end up being sexually exploited enter Northern Ireland legally and with appropriate documentation. Some may know that they are coming to work in the prostitution industry but Detectives have also encountered young women who believed they were coming to work in legitimate industries such as childcare, hospitality or warehousing. By partnering with other law enforcement agencies such as Border Force, victims can be intercepted and safeguarded as they transit into the country via recognized trafficking hubs such as Amsterdam.



DC Heather Flanigan with Border Force colleagues at Belfast City Airport.

Partnership with An Garda Síochána

An Garda Síochána's (AGS) Human Trafficking Investigation and Coordination Unit (HTICU) and Organised Prostitution Investigation Unit, which focuses on targeting organised prostitution and associated offences, continues to work closely with PSNI's MSHT Unit.

Due to the increasing cross border element involved in human trafficking, AGS and PSNI are continually supporting and communicating with each other on emerging trends and changes in activity regarding human trafficking on both sides of the border. This cooperation assists in progressing investigations and in ensuring the continued safety and welfare of potential victims.

CASE STUDIES

PSNI WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AN GARDA SIOCHANA

In April 2022, AGS's Organised Prostitution Investigation Unit and HTICU, in conjunction with PSNI's MSHT Unit, conducted a multi-agency, cross border operation focusing on potential sexual exploitation linked to Chinese massage parlours. A number of premises located throughout Northern Ireland were visited by MSHT Unit officers and in the Republic of Ireland. The focus was on relevant businesses and brothels in the Cavan area. During this operation, AGS were assisted by colleagues from Immigration and the Workplace Relations Commission, whilst PSNI was supported by Home Office Immigration Enforcement, HMRC and Health and Safety representatives from local councils. As a result of this operation, both PSNI and AGS officers completed safeguarding of all individuals present at the premises attended.

In September 2022, AGS's Organised Prostitution Investigation Unit and HTICU, in conjunction with PSNI's MSHT Unit, conducted a cross border operation, focusing on potential sexual exploitation in the border counties. The principal purpose of the operation was to conduct safeguarding visits with sex workers who work north and south of the border. The primary focus was the identification of potential victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. On this occasion, no potential victims of trafficking were identified, however details of the support available was provided to all individuals encountered.

As a result of increased refugee arrivals and associated vulnerabilities to sexual crime exploitation, the Organised Prostitution Investigation Unit within AGS proactively sought out newly advertised escorts utilising Ukrainian identification cards to place their advertisements. As a result of this initiative, AGS identified two Ukrainian sisters aged 17 and 20, believed to be working in the sex trade on both sides of the border. A safeguarding visit was subsequently conducted which identified third party involvement. Both females were removed from their situation and assisted with foreign travel arrangements at their request in collaboration with other policing jurisdictions. Further investigative enquiries by PSNI identified a male who facilitated the travel arrangements of both females into Dublin and their subsequent movement between brothels located north and south of the border. A day of action initiated by PSNI in October 2022 resulted in the arrest of this male who was later released on police bail pending a thorough forensic examination of electronic devices seized.

FORWARD LOOK

The Department of Justice MSHT and Child Exploitation team continues to collaborate with partners through the OCTF MSHT Sub-Group and the NGO Engagement Forum, as well as engaging with colleagues in the Home Office and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales and counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

A Strategic Response to MSHT

The Department continues to progress work on the development of a new three-year Strategy for MSHT. Following the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Department will seek to publish this new Strategy shortly. Throughout the reporting period, the Department and partners continued to work towards the commitments outlined in the draft Strategy, as well as those outlined in previous strategies, to ensure the response to MSHT remained consistent and effective.

Slavery Trafficking Risk Orders and Duty to Notify Provisions

In March 2022, the Department launched a public consultation on a range of measures to improve the response to MSHT, including;

- the introduction of Slavery Trafficking Risk Orders in Northern Ireland;
- commencing Duty to Notify provisions already included in the 2015 Act; and
- the power of the police to search someone suspected of trafficking or exploitation during a search of premises under warrant for evidence linked to MSHT offences.

These measures have remained as key considerations for the Department in the development of the new three-year Strategy.

PSNI's MSHT Unit will continue to work with partner agencies with the aim of frustrating, disrupting or dismantling OCGs involved in modern slavery offences and to safeguard and provide support to potential victims of trafficking.

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

Various OCTF partners are working to disrupt organised crime involving the movement of people, goods and money in and out of Northern Ireland. Immigration Enforcement, a Directorate of the Home Office, is responsible for protecting the public by removing immigration offenders, prosecuting the criminals who facilitate immigration crime and driving cross-sector action to increase compliance with immigration law.

Immigration Enforcement's mission is to reduce the illegal (migrant) population and the harm it causes. In Northern Ireland, Immigration Enforcement conducts enforcement operations against a range of immigration crime, including facilitation, document fraud, sham marriages, rogue employers and illegal workers. It also has an important role to play in preventing abuse of the Common Travel Area (CTA).

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

During 2022/23, Organised Immigration Crime continued to evolve as a threat. There were significant interactions and relationships between Immigration OCGs, operating on both sides of the UK and Republic of Ireland land boundary and internationally across Europe. Almost all the OCGs investigated by both jurisdictions are known to have strong links and associations with OCGs based in both UK and Republic of Ireland, but ongoing enforcement activities with OCTF partners reinforced Northern Ireland's capacity to tackle immigration-related crime and resulted in convictions and deportations of serious criminals.

Immigration Enforcement uses all available powers to intercept, arrest and/or prosecute immigration offenders, including foreign national criminals seeking to circumvent UK immigration controls.

Criminal Investigators are embedded into PSNI's Organised Crime and Modern Slavery teams to assist with joint investigations. Immigration Enforcement also works closely with Republic of Ireland's criminal investigators on cross border investigations into organised CTA abuse, facilitation and the production and supply of false documentation.



CASE STUDY

SYRIAN OCG ENGAGED IN ASSISTING UNLAWFUL IMMIGRATION VIA CROSS BORDER ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (ABUSE OF THE CTA)

A Syrian OCG was identified smuggling migrants into the UK via abuse of the CTA. In a three week period in November 2021 the OCG was responsible for smuggling 42 illegal entrants into the UK via abuse of the CTA. Evidence was collated with assistance from authorities in Republic of Ireland and four OCG members were identified strategically placed across the UK. A pan-UK wide arrest operation took place in March 2022; four suspects were arrested in Northern Ireland and London, with subsequent charges implemented and defendants remanded into criminal custody. A significant cash seizure was made alongside the seizure of a high value vehicle and a number of electronic devices seized accordingly. Two defendants subsequently pleaded guilty and were sentenced in May 2023 to three years imprisonment for facilitation offences.

CASE STUDY

SOMALI OCG INVOLVED IN ASSISTING UNLAWFUL IMMIGRATION AND ASSOCIATED MONEY LAUNDERING OFFENCES VIA CROSS BORDER ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (ABUSE OF THE COMMON TRAVEL AREA)

A Somali OCG has been identified smuggling migrants into the Republic of Ireland and onwards to the UK via abuse of the CTA. Three suspects were identified and arrested in the UK in May and August 2022. €30,000 were seized along with mobile devices; the OCG operation has also expanded into Belgium. Both UK and Ireland are engaging, proactively disseminating intelligence and implementing tactical opportunities to effectively tackle and disrupt the OCG. A number of suspects were charged in May 2023 for both Immigration and Money Laundering offences.

CASE STUDY

BOLIVIAN OCG INVOLVED IN ASSISTING UNLAWFUL IMMIGRATION AND ILLEGAL WORKING IN THE UNDERGROUND ECONOMY VIA ABUSE OF THE COMMON TRAVEL AREA

A Bolivian OCG has been identified smuggling migrants into the Republic of Ireland and onwards to the UK via abuse of the CTA. Three suspects have been identified and arrested in the UK in December 2022 and subsequently charged and remanded into criminal custody. False documents and suspected criminal property were seized along with mobile devices. The OCG operation has also expanded to Bolivia. Both the UK and Republic of Ireland are engaging and proactively disseminating information to disrupt the OCG and target the suspected immigration abuse at source. A trial is anticipated in the near future and co-ordination with the Ministry of Justice in Ireland has successfully led to Bolivian Nationals being made VISA Nationals which will have a major impact on the suspected abuse.



FORWARD LOOK

Immigration Enforcement will continue to extend its reach, making it increasingly difficult for people to live or stay in Northern Ireland illegally and for criminals to commit immigration-related crime.

Immigration Enforcement will continue to intervene upstream through its overseas networks to disrupt organised criminals abroad and provide intelligence to the visa issuing process to prevent inadmissible passengers from travelling to the UK. It will continue to strengthen its relationship with the Republic of Ireland to ensure that individuals who would not be admissible to either jurisdiction are unable to travel to the CTA.

Immigration Enforcement will build on its work with Northern Ireland's OCTF partners and the Republic of Ireland's law enforcement agencies to target foreign national offenders and organised immigration crime. Immigration Enforcement will continue to play its part in the cross border organised crime structures and continue its work with An Garda Síochána and UK Border Force in conducting intensification campaigns to tackle cross border and wider immigration crime.

The implementation of the UK's Illegal Migration Act in July 2023 has the potential to increase cross-border criminality between UK and Ireland. OCGs have the expertise to adapt and change, both to avoid detection by law enforcement partners and to exploit changes in profitability. It is likely that they will attempt to profit from any of these changes by potentially exploiting the CTA.

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 a number of 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 as well as individual who are willing to 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 the Republic of Ireland and mainland Europe, as a result of the UK leaving the European Union. Law enforcement and partner agencies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland work together closely to identify and tackle the emerging threats linked to these routes and a number of seizures and arrests have been made.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Border Force secures the 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.

During the past year Border Force has worked alongside partner agencies in planned and reactive operational activity. Collaborative working has been key in frustrating and disrupting OCGs throughout the year.

Safeguarding at the border

Frontline staff in Border Force are provided with training in identifying potential victims of modern slavery. 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 teams who receive classroom training focussing on the knowledge and skills needed for this area.

RESULTS

Border Force drug seizures are recorded in the Drugs Section of the Report.

Other Border Force Operational Highlights include:

- 280kg of Tobacco
- 872k Cigarettes
- 3242 Counterfeit Items
- £26,870 in cash
- 27 Offensive Weapons

Counterfeit Goods detected at the border

Border Force officers have seized substantial amounts of counterfeit goods that have been imported into Northern Ireland in the last year. Goods have included trainers, t-shirts, football tops, phones, chargers, ear pods, hair straighteners and watches. Items are often misdescribed and bear no resemblance to what is detected. Goods are mainly imported from China and Turkey.

Referrals are made to the rights holder who decide what course of action they wish to take against the importer.

CASE STUDIES - COUNTERFEIT CLOTHING

1,300 ITEMS OF CLOTHING DETAINED AND DESTROYED

Parcels from China containing 1,300 items of clothing, including trainers, tracksuits, socks etc from various brands (mostly Adidas) were detected, detained and referred to the rights holder. No response from importer and the rights holder confirmed the goods were counterfeit. Goods were subsequently sent for destruction.

282 PAIRS OF PREMIUM BRANDED UNDERWEAR

282 pairs of premium branded underwear were detected inside a package declared as "clothes". The goods were suspected of being counterfeit. The Intellectual Property holder confirmed this and the goods were subsequently sent for destruction.

CIGARETTE SEIZURES

Seizures of cigarettes and tobacco at fast parcel depots continue to be detected. "Little and often" is the continued "*modus operandi*" relating to fast parcels with the vast majority originating from China, Poland and Germany.

Seizures also continue at the airports, namely from ports in Spain, Turkey and the Canary Islands. The latter two operate under third-country rules of tax which vastly reduces the cost to the end user.

CASE STUDIES - CIGARETTES

23,500 CIGARETTES SEIZED

23,500 cigarettes were seized during the examination of baggage on the Dalaman to Belfast flight. The passenger initially indicated he was only carrying a small amount, however, x-ray images indicated this was not the case, with large amounts visible inside. All goods were seized and destroyed.



Photo of packets of cigarettes seized following x ray images being taken

CIGARETTE CONCEALMENT EXAMPLE

Officers risk testing a parcel were not content with the declaration and opened for further examination. The package was declared as "clothes" to the value of \$13. Inside the package was a "North Face" jacket. However, upon further examination of the jacket, 800 cigarettes were found to be concealed within the back stitching of the jacket; the goods were seized and subsequently destroyed.



CASE STUDIES - OFFENSIVE WEAPONS

13 OFFENSIVE WEAPONS SEIZED

Following self-selection of a package during fast parcel deployment, 13 various offensive weapons were seized destined for an address in North Belfast having been imported from Poland. Follow-up searches and seizures adopted by PSNI for prosecution.



Photo of various offensive weapons seized

3 THROWING STARS SEIZED

Following examination of baggage belonging to a passenger disembarking from a flight from Bulgaria to Belfast, three Throwing Stars were discovered. The weapons were declared upon examination, seized and subsequently destroyed.



Photo of three Offensive weapons seized

FORWARD LOOK

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

Border Force continues to work with other law enforcement departments to understand the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol on serious and organised crime and how OCGs may adapt to vulnerabilities exposed by the Protocol.

Going forward, Border Force welcomed a new resource - *Ragley* – a detection dog. *Ragley* is trained to detect illicit substances and will be a valuable asset in the organisation's efforts to disrupt and frustrate organised crime at the border.

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

3.8 EXCISE EVASION AND TAX FRAUD

FUEL

THE 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 the Republic of Ireland indicates that the laundering activity continues to take place mainly in border areas.

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.

RESPONDING TO THE 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 RDCO’s 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

CASE STUDY

OP BLENDER

In June 2022, HMRC Officers, accompanied by PSNI Officers, searched premises in the South Armagh area. A fuel distillation and a traditional filtration laundering plant were detected inside agricultural sheds adjacent to residential premises. The plants were dismantled and the various fuel laundering equipment was seized along with 2,800 litres of laundered fuel. A significant amount of waste product was on site which was referred to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) who subsequently found an illegal waste dump to the rear of the property. DNA and fingerprints were uplifted and the investigation is ongoing to identify those involved in this criminal activity with a view to prosecutions.



Photo of a fuel laundering plant

CASE STUDY

FUEL LAUNDERING

In January 2023, two fuel laundering plants were detected in the same shed in South Armagh – one employing filtration methods and the other laundering by distillation. Although not in operation, it was evident there had previously been in operation for some time and, based on the capacity of the storage tanks, it is estimated to cost an annual revenue loss of £15 million.



Photo of fuel laundering equipment

FORWARD LOOK

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 the Republic of 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 PSNI and NIEA to ensure that intelligence streams are maximised.

TOBACCO

THE THREAT

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

Despite overall cigarette consumption declining, illicit consumption rose by 3.1% in 2022 to reach 21.2% in the UK. The smuggling of counterfeit cigarettes was assessed as the largest threat within tobacco fraud targeting the UK, followed closely by the smuggling of 'cheap white' cigarettes with an increase in the supply from Poland and Romania. The majority of the supply comes from Eastern Europe via Ro-Ro traffic as well as 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 the 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 the Republic of Ireland are amongst 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 THREAT

Moving forward, the government has announced a consultation on creating a smokefree generation. In light of this the need to ensure enforcement actions keep pace with criminals who adapt quickly to new controls has been recognised, as when legitimate smoking is made less attractive by the government, illegal supply can serve as a dangerous alternative. An additional £30 million funding will be provided to support enforcement agencies in implementing and enforcing the law and tackling illicit trade.

HMRC and Border Force will also publish an updated Illicit Tobacco Strategy which will set out plans to be at the forefront of tackling illegal activity and opportunities criminals might seek to exploit.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

OP DIERNA

In July 2022, Border Force Officers searched a container which was found to contain more than 10 million Non-UK Duty paid cigarettes. The seizure was referred to HMRC for further investigation. In October 2022, HMRC Officers accompanied by PSNI searched three properties and arrested four individuals. A referral was also made to PSNI regarding drugs found during the intervention. The value of the duty evaded is believed to be £4.7 million. Investigations are continuing with a view to prosecutions.



Photo of 10 million Non-UK Duty paid cigarettes

ALCOHOL

THE 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 Northern 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, but the most significant risk currently involves the use of legitimate haulage and freight forwarding agents to move illicit product into Great Britain and via Northern Ireland ports.

UK Transit Diversion is 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 their destination country of the 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.

Other modus operandi used by alcohol fraud OCGs include smuggling, where there is no attempt to provide alcohol movement documentation and UK Import Fraud, where, unlike UK Transit Diversion, the goods are destined for the UK but have been mis-described, or undeclared ABV (alcohol by volume) strengths for example. The contribution of other modes of fraud such as counterfeiting are less significant.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Alcohol fraud is tackled at both UK borders, 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.

In 2022/23, HMRC intensification activities at UK borders caused a reduction of illicit border traffic by 55%. This has caused a notable increase of 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.

During 2022/23 it was considered that the risk of the introduction of green and red lane checks in Northern Ireland under the Windsor Framework may lead to an increase in traffic to ports in the Republic of Ireland. Media reports show a significant increase in freight traffic from Europe to the Republic of Ireland as traders seek to avoid new border controls with Britain.

RESULTS

CASE STUDY

UK IMPORT FRAUD

In September 2022, HMRC officers, accompanied by PSNI, examined an unaccompanied 40ft trailer at Belfast Port, which was outbound for Port Ryan, Scotland. 28 pallets of mixed brand foreign beer were detected and seized. Checks showed that the paperwork accompanying the load was false. The next day HMRC examined a further trailer under similar circumstances and discovered a further 31 pallets of mixed brand foreign beer. In total 44,604 litres of beer were seized with a duty evaded of approximately £42,374.



Photo of 40 foot trailer with pallets of mixed brand foreign beer

CASE STUDY

UK IMPORT FRAUD

In January 2023, HMRC Officers, working alongside PSNI, detected and seized two unaccompanied trailers containing illicit loads of alcohol. One seizure was made at Belfast Port and the other at Birkenhead. Each trailer contained 24 pallets of beer, neither had accompanying paperwork and the loads were mis-manifested as peat. The sailing route used was Belfast to Birkenhead. In total 52,870 litres of beer were seized with duty evaded of approximately £50,227.



Photo of unaccompanied trailers containing illicit loads of alcohol

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 degrade and have a corrosive impact on the daily lives of individuals and communities, businesses, public services and infrastructure.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) continues to lead the UK fight to cut SOC and to protect the public and the communities that are affected.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

In Northern Ireland, the NCA works closely with PSNI as well as local, national and international partners to identify, tackle and disrupt the national SOC threat and is seeking consistently to maximise the opportunities for further collaboration.

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 takes into account the specific and differing legislative, operational and political requirements. The NCA continues to play an active role in the OCTF, as well as the Paramilitary Crime Task Force and the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force (JATF).

RESULTS

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

- PSNI arrested the subject of a warrant issued by German law enforcement partners in 2022/23 Q3. NCA intelligence located the subject, who had been sentenced in Germany to eight years imprisonment for committing serious sexual offences against a child. Extradition proceedings are currently underway.
- In March, a subject that used social media for the grooming and blackmail of five children for indecent images was arrested, with one of the victims being located in Northern Ireland. The subject befriended the victims to obtain imagery and then threatened to share images with the victims' friends unless more were sent.

Organised Immigration Crime (OIC)

- During April 2022, arrests were made by the NCA in relation to an investigation involving members of an organised crime group suspected of facilitating the clandestine movement of migrants into the UK via criminal hauliers. Several law enforcement agencies, including PSNI and the Northern Ireland Environmental Agency (NIEA), approached the NCA regarding one of the Suspects of Interest (Sol). Members of this group had links to Northern Ireland. A range of offences also include fuel laundering, tobacco and cigarette smuggling.

Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking

- Project AIDANT is an intensification program, led by the NCA, consisting of coordinated national activity with participation from police forces and law enforcement agencies across the UK. This activity may include visiting addresses, border checks, community engagement and awareness raising to identify (and safeguard) victims of MSHT and arrest their traffickers. AIDANT activity in April 2022 focused on Vietnamese nail bars and massage parlours. PSNI conducted safeguarding visits and multiple searches relating to prostitution offences took place. Criminal investigations have commenced against the owners of each linked premises.

Firearms

- A suspect was arrested who had ordered a Front Venting Blank Firing (FVBF) weapon from Spain. Emanating from an NCA project, this NCA investigation involved the International Liaison Officer network and Belfast based NCA teams. PSNI supported this, attending the warrant, which resulted in the seizure of a further 13 forward-venting blank firers, two prohibited air weapons and numerous offensive weapons including machetes.
- An NCA operation led to the seizure of a SIG P20 handgun and 52 rounds of 9mm ammunition, which was posted to Northern Ireland from the USA. Three suspects were identified. One offender from the USA is currently convicted and awaiting sentencing. A further two people from Northern Ireland were identified; one pled guilty to possession of a firearm and ammunition and drugs and the second is awaiting trial.

Drugs

- In April 2022 during an ongoing drugs importation investigation, NCA officers, accompanied by PSNI, completed an arrest and search operation at the home of one suspect. The suspect was arrested and interviewed by NCA officers for money laundering offences relating to a £30,000 deposit into their bank account from suspects within a linked investigation. The subject has been released on bail until August 2022. The investigation has seized 21 kg of cocaine and, in total, four suspects have been interviewed in Northern Ireland.
- In March 2023 a subject travelling to Belfast from Malaysia (via Oman and Birmingham) was detained at Belfast Airport after 15 kg of cannabis contained within four vacuum packed containers was identified within their luggage. The subject was subsequently arrested, charged and remanded into custody for 28 days in relation to drugs possession and importation offences. The NCA is progressing the case.
- Following an investigation into the importation, supply and distribution of Class C drugs, a subject was sentenced to two years imprisonment (12 months to be served on licence) in January 2023. The subject was arrested in March 2022 at Belfast International Airport after a search of his bags uncovered 32 kg of cannabis. This recovery formed part of the wider NCA prevention messaging strategy targeting drugs trafficking from North America.
- Two subjects from Antrim who were seen exchanging £20,000 in cash and one kilogram of cannabis were sentenced in February 2023 following a Paramilitary Crime Task Force operation. NCA officers, supported by colleagues from PSNI, arrested one person. The second person was arrested at his home where a further £965 was seized as well as small quantities of cocaine and cannabis. Both were charged with possession with intent to supply. They were given a 12-month sentence suspended for two years and a 26 month sentence respectively.

Economic Crime

- The first Account Freezing Order (AFO), since the introduction of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in Northern Ireland, was obtained. The AFO was granted under Part 5 of the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA). The subject is linked to violent paramilitary activity, the supply of controlled drugs and illegal money lending. The Frozen Funds investigation is ongoing and is being conducted under the auspices of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force. The individual is also the subject of a Bankruptcy Petition by the NCA for an unpaid tax debt of £199,000.
- The first Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO), since the introduction of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in Northern Ireland, was being sought. The UWO was lodged with the High Court in Belfast in relation to a Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) investigation. The subject was suspected of fraud offences, money laundering and the fraudulent evasion of excise duty.
- An ex-Dublin airport police officer, who was the main subject of an NCA investigation, was sentenced to 20 months imprisonment in May 2022. He was found guilty of smuggling €180,000 in cash through Belfast airport. The NCA, working with law enforcement colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, established patterns of routine travel from airports in Republic of Ireland and the UK. It is expected that this sentence will have an impact on linked criminal associates utilising this method of exporting cash. A number of NCA capabilities, including the Expert Laundering Evidence team, were involved in this arrest.
- The NCA, working as part of the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, seized £28,000 held in a bank account and property in Northern Ireland valued at £85,000 from an offender with links to West Belfast UDA (Ulster Defence Association) for fraud and money laundering offences.
- In February, two subjects were stopped outbound from Belfast airport to Montenegro. They were found to have £25,810 of undeclared currency within their luggage. Both subjects had declared £5,000 each carried in their hand luggage; however, a search of their hold luggage found £16,000 concealed inside a cooking pot and shoes. Following an interview with the subjects, the cash was seized under Proceeds of Crime Act powers and HMRC records for the subjects are being reviewed. A continued Detention Order for the cash has been granted until May 23. The NCA's investigation continues.

Cyber-crime

- The NCA collaborated with PSNI to support the investigation of a compromised public body IT system with over 200,000 members. The National Cyber Crime Unit's Triage Incident Coordination and Tasking (TICAT) conducted immediate research across NCA and NCCU systems to assess the extent of the risk and inform the appropriate response, which was in this case the tasking of the investigation to PSNI. NCCU offered continued support to PSNI throughout in managing this risk.
- The NCA provided support to PSNI in a suspected 'virtual kidnap' involving a student studying at a University in Belfast. This is a type of telecommunications fraud where offenders encourage a victim to fake their own kidnap to extort the family for a ransom. NCA and PSNI officers made a number of inquiries and located the victim alone in a hotel room, where she was then safeguarded. The victim's family had paid a significant sum to the offenders prior to police involvement and a reactive investigation is currently underway.

FORWARD LOOK

The NCA works collaboratively with local, national and international partners to identify, tackle and disrupt serious and organised crime threats impacting Northern Ireland and will:

- Ensure all relevant institutions remain engaged in the delivery of the Agency's operational objectives;
- Tackle new and emerging threats and support mutual strategic priorities targeting upstream enablers and high value targets causing the greatest harm to communities;
- Disrupt organised criminal activity with the greatest impact on local communities in Northern Ireland; and
- Support the operational response in Northern Ireland through the Agency's specialist capabilities to include Cyber and the International Liaison Officer network; establishing the UK Designated Reporting Body for child sexual abuse referrals from online service providers; and the Agency's work to tackle online criminality."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Report crimes or suspicious activity to:

- PSNI Telephone 101
- Via the PSNI website
www.psni.police.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

This criminality causes environmental harm and provides OCGs with profits that can fund other criminality. These same OCGs are also involved in associated tax evasion. Criminality can take a variety of forms including the following:

- **Large-scale fraud and tax evasion** – the use of fraudulently obtained waste management licenses to facilitate the illegal transport and disposal of waste and the covert movement of illicit commodities; and
- **Dumping of fuel laundering waste** – fuel laundering remains an issue on both sides of the border and involves the removal of marker dyes from rebated fuel. The waste resulting from the laundering process forms a sludge that is either dumped illegally in its raw state, or in intermediate bulk containers (IBCs) that can leak. This sludge is highly toxic and can pollute land and waterways. Laundering plants and waste are found on both sides of the border and have links to OCGs. It is DAERA's responsibility to clean-up this type of waste in the interests of public safety and minimise environmental damage. In the 2022/23 financial year, NIEA responded to six reports of fuel laundering waste and removed a total of 76.9 tonnes of fuel laundering waste. This removal and disposal cost the public purse almost £50,000.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Information held by partner agencies suggests the involvement of OCGs in large-scale waste crime in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) works closely with law enforcement partners in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and further afield as required. This partnership approach allows the pooling of information, resources and enforcement capabilities to work more efficiently and effectively.

To tackle the threat Environmental Crime poses, the NIEA will continue to focus its resource on criminals who seek to profit from their environmental criminality. In addition to convictions, the agency will continue to deploy its effective financial investigation capability to remove illicit assets and deprive criminals of the means of offending in future.

CASE STUDY

FUEL LAUNDERING WASTE DUMPED ON ROADSIDE

In July 2022, fuel laundering waste was located dumped at the side of a rural road, 30 metres from the border, in the Cullyhanna area. There were three IBCs located, one of which had split and the contents, a black oily liquid, had spilled across the road.



RESULTS

CASE STUDY

FUEL LAUNDERING WASTE

In June 2022, a 40ft trailer unit was found abandoned in the Armagh area. NIEA removed a total of 22 IBCs from the trailer unit, containing more than 20,000 kg of fuel laundering waste. The trailer was also seized.



Photo of 40ft trailer containing more than 20,000 kg of fuel laundering waste.

FORWARD LOOK

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 enviromentalcrime@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

3.11 ORGANISED CRIME AGAINST THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

THE THREAT

The Department for Communities administers an annual benefit expenditure of £7.5 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 under-payments for customers and putting pressure on the public purse. The Organised Fraud Unit (OFU) is responsible for undertaking investigations into allegations of potential organised criminality against the benefit and National Insurance Number (NINO) systems.

After rising in the years following the Covid-19 virus pandemic over-payments, as a result of customer fraud and error, have fallen during 2022-23 and now stand at £149.4 million, or 2% of total benefit expenditure. A significant proportion of these over-payments relate to Universal Credit (UC). The vast majority of UC claimants will self-serve online providing opportunities to make the journey easier for claimants. In addition, the use of a digital delivery channel for UC will also provide further opportunities to use analytical methods to identify system vulnerabilities and therefore remove the potential for some fraud and error. This is important given technical capabilities for data sharing and analytics are evolving quickly, both within the benefit system and those seeking to defraud the benefit system.

OFU continues to deal with cyber-related and web-enabled attacks on the benefit system with the majority of cyber-related frauds detected involving a hijacked or false identity. These frauds are often linked to wider criminality – emphasising the importance of ongoing work to build, maintain and develop further working relationships with other government departments and external agencies throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Easements put in place during the Covid-19 virus pandemic created conditions where low tech but organised attacks on the benefit system have been conducted. OFU continue working to identify and investigate such attacks across the benefit system.

RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

Throughout 2022/23 OFU continues to focus on 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

CASE STUDY

HIJACKED IDENTITY

An individual made over 39 attempts for benefit payments (mainly Universal Credit) using other people's identities. Wider fraud offences were identified and PSNI was informed of the case, commencing a joint investigation with the Department for Communities' OFU. In total, payments were discovered in 19 identities totalling over £20,000. The individual was also interviewed about an additional five attempted frauds which had caused severe financial hardship for five genuine benefit claimants. In October 2023 the individual pleaded guilty to all charges; the subject was sentenced in February 2024 and received a total of 18 months – nine months to be spent in custody and nine months on licence.

The same individual previously appeared in court in Spring 2023 also in relation to benefit fraud offences. On this occasion benefit payments were diverted from a previous victim's bank account to the suspect's bank account. The court delivered a suspended prison sentence on these offences.

CASE STUDY

CONFISCATION ORDER GRANTED

The Financial Investigation Unit obtained a Confiscation Order for £18,559 against a man who failed to declare that he held savings of £75,000 whilst claiming means tested benefit. The man claimed Employment and Support Allowance on the basis he was unfit for employment, declaring that he had no capital or other source of income.

CASE STUDY

FINANCIAL INVESTIGATION UNIT

During 2022/23, the Department's Financial Investigation Unit secured Confiscation Orders to the value of £76,000 and received voluntary payments amounting to £23,000 giving a total recovery of £99,000.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are three methods to report benefit fraud:

1) Report benefit fraud online:
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:

9 Cases
Received

Confiscations:

16 Confiscation
Orders Granted

Totalling:

£1,480,061

Decisions Issued for offences relating to the Relevant Offence Groups

(based on Most Serious Decision Issued between 01/04/2022 and 31/03/2023)

Offence Group	Indictable Prosecution	Summary Prosecution	Diversion	No prosecution	Total
Money Laundering	110	78	0	90	278
Controlling Prostitution	3	0	0	3	6
Child Prostitution	-	0	0	-	#
Drugs	345	3339	719	593	4996
Drugs (excluding simple possession)	294	288	47	244	873
Human Trafficking	3	0	0	4	7

"-" refers to a count of less than 3.

"#" refers to a number >=3 which has been suppressed to prevent disclosure of small numbers elsewhere.

File Source	Indictable Prosecution	Summary Prosecution	Diversion	No prosecution	Total
NIEA	8	23	0	-	#
HMRC	27	-	0	6	#

PPS Statistics and Research October 2023



**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 2022/23 financial year in Northern Ireland was almost £700,000.

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 2022/23.

Agency	ARIS Payments 2022/23
Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	£52,651
HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC)	£42,752
Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA)	£39,940
Home Office – Immigration Enforcement	nil
Department for Communities (DfC)	£18,832
Public Prosecution Service (PPS)	£154,175
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS)	£34,261
Total Paid	£342,611

During 2022/23, the agencies used their incentivisation allocations for a number of purposes including:

PSNI

PSNI used ARIS funding for:

- various crime prevention equipment across a number of districts;
- night vision equipment to assist with drugs investigations and missing person enquires;
- an information discovery tool to assist in disrupting systemic human trafficking in order to safeguard victims;
- drones for evidence gathering; and
- surveillance equipment.

HMRC

For the financial year 2022/23, the HMRC ARIS fund provided £30m of funding to 21 projects within HMRC. The fund invested in a range of projects to improve counter-fraud capabilities. These included the delivery of specialist IT systems, additional legal support for complex fraud cases and capability building in support of international partnerships on fiscal fraud.

NIEA

In the reporting period, NIEA Environmental Crime Unit used monies received through ARIS to drive asset recovery activity and tackle crime through the funding of training, services and equipment.

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES (DfC)

DfC used these monies to part-fund the position of a Financial Intelligence Officer within the unit.

NATIONAL CRIME AGENCY

Funding was allocated to purchase equipment and training for Immigration Enforcement and Criminal and Financial Investigation Officers, to support the ongoing efforts to target and disrupt organised immigration crime.

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.

NI COURTS AND TRIBUNAL SERVICE (NICTS)

The funding was used by NICTS to provide administrative support for Northern Ireland's courts and tribunals 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.

Confiscation order receipts continued at an unpredictable rate, following the impact of Covid-19. The last call for applications was launched in August 2022 when 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 funding 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 2022/23 are set out below, followed by a comprehensive list of all the projects funded during the period of this report.



Looked After Children participating in outdoor diversionary activities.

Kinship Care Northern Ireland

Kinship Care NI's "THRIVE" project provided targeted interventions for Looked After Children to reduce the likelihood of care experienced young people becoming involved with the police. The THRIVE project was allocated £7,000 in 2022/23 and £14,000 in 2023/24 with the aim of helping young people (from different religious and community backgrounds) understand the consequences of their behaviour and the importance of making positive choices.

Over the course of a six month period in 2022/23 more than 80 young people took part in drop-in sessions and structured activities which focussed on improving confidence, communication, regulating emotions and respecting others. Diversionary activities brought young people together and provided them with a safe environment to express themselves and develop friendships with others with similar life experiences. These activities also provided the opportunity for them to learn important life skills, eg listening, empathy, teamwork and problem solving.

The feedback from the young participants was very positive, some quotes from their completed questionnaires are as follows:

- "I feel more confident".
- "I know not what the job of the police is and it must be a hard job".
- "I learned that when you take drink or drugs that you will probably end up getting into trouble".

There has been positive feedback from the carers of young people, for example one carer stated that the young person in their care "loves coming to the Centre and I have seen a big improvement in his behaviour. He seems more mature - I have noticed it and his older brother has also noticed". THRIVE continues into the 2023/24 financial year.



Looked After Children taking part in activities helping them focus on improving confidence and communication skills.

White Ribbon Northern Ireland

White Ribbon Northern Ireland's "Listen, Learn, Lead" youth workshops project was allocated £5,000 in 2022/23 and £10,000 in 2023/24. This project's focus was on community engagement and raising awareness about violence against women and girls (VAWG). These workshops introduced young people, not exclusively young men but they were encouraged to attend, to engage with the trainers, through presentations, video clips and group work activities as well as a take home guide. During a six month period in 2022/23 the workshops connected directly with 120 participants.

The feedback from participants has been that their knowledge around VAWG had improved and all participants agreed they would feel more comfortable in challenging the attitudes and beliefs which lead to VAWG. All participants chose to sign the White Ribbon Charter – making their personal pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about VAWG.

The workshops included clearly defining VAWG and highlighted crimes such as stalking and harassment. This has given participants a clearer understanding of the consequences their actions could have. The workshops also give clear guidance for bystander interventions and encourages participants to address offensive behaviours early on. The project continues into the 2023/24 financial year.



Members of Larne Football Club participating in a "Listen, Learn, Lead" workshop and signing the White Ribbon Charter.

Flourish Northern Ireland

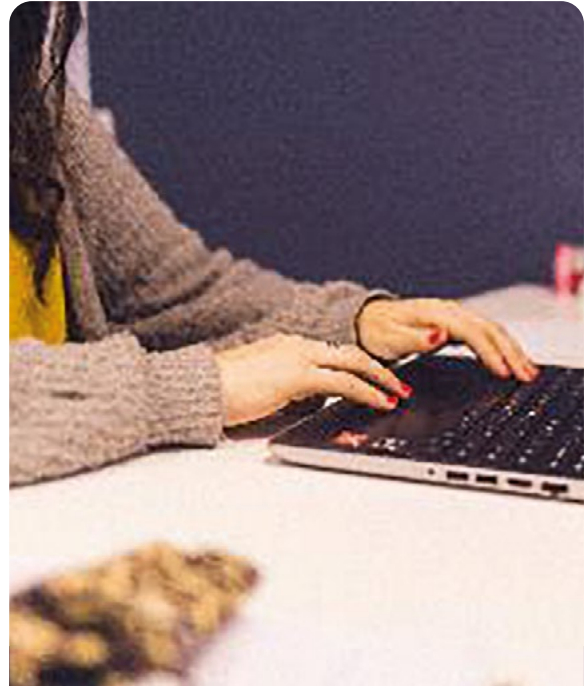
Flourish's project "Resilient Survivors and Communities" was allocated £9,000 in 2022/23 and £18,000 in 2023/24 from the ARCS budget.

During the six months that the project operated in 2022/23 eight survivors of human trafficking received support. Initial assessments were completed for each person and included issues such as housing, finances, mental health, physical health, legal, modern slavery, safety, education, employment and social support. From this assessment a journey plan was drafted and immediate safety needs considered as well as longer term goals, empowering survivors towards leading safe, independent and resilient lives.

Through casework, intensive one to one support is provided, tailored to the needs of individuals. A skills-based course was also facilitated which included activities such as an accredited skill-based nail technician course, English classes and computer skills.

Regular assessments measure each client's progress in nine different areas of life and once the assessment results are demonstrating positive outcomes in most/all areas, the caseworker and survivor will discuss being discharged from the intensive support service. Further follow-up services and support are provided as needed.

75% of participants reported they could put in place safe boundaries in the future and engage in safe behaviours thus reducing the likelihood of harm in the future. 100% of participants in the skills-based course reported feeling empowered through the skills based course. The project continues into the 2023/24 financial year.



Casework support is provided to individuals.



*"Thank you for your contribution.
We are free today because you gave
us the courage to tell the true story of
our lives and after long time this was
crowned with success."*

I am proud to be part of Flourish"
- Client who received Refugee Status

Quote from a Flourish client.

ARCS PROJECTS OFFERED FUNDING DURING 2022/23 (6 MONTHS) AND 2023/24 (12 MONTHS)

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Ardaluin Regeneration Trust	C.R.I.M.E Stop – Challenge Rubbish In My Environment	£6,000	£12,000	Educational programme – environmental crime in Newcastle and surrounding areas.
Artillery Youth Centre	Youth and Community Safety Project	£6,500	£15,000	Programme of diversionary activities in North Belfast aimed at local young people and community safety.
ASCERT	Should I Drive? Project	£3,867	£9,000	Awareness programme for young people about the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs.
Ballymacash Regeneration Network	Youth and Identity	£3,000	N/A	Youth intervention project in Ballymacash area of Lisburn.
Barnardo's	Bridging the Gap	N/A	£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	£6,000	£12,000	Educational programme - environmental crime in East Belfast.
Blackie River Community Group	Safe Community - Working Together	£4,000	£8,000	Community safety programme in Beechmount, Iveagh & St James areas of Belfast.
Bogside and Brandywell Initiative	CRASHED – A Road Safety Conference for Young Drivers	£5,200	N/A	Road safety education programme aimed at sixth year students.
Building Bridges Community Arts Theatre	LGBTQ+ Crime Prevention Project	£3,000	N/A	Project focused on education around hate crime, based in Lurgan.
Chinese Welfare Association NI	HELPinHAND Project	£7,000	£10,000	Funding towards development and launch of app to provide information for victims of race and hate crimes.
Christians Against Poverty (CAP) Larne	Helping End the Harm	£3,539	N/A	Financial education in order to avoid illegal lending, based in Larne.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Community Intercultural Programme	INTERLINK	£3,000	£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	£5,000	£12,000	Reduce re-offending through outdoor exploration & activities.
Connect Fermanagh	Connect Fermanagh Crime Aware Initiative	£1,000	£2,000	Project involving crime awareness across Fermanagh.
Corpus Christi Youth Centre	Ballymurphy Community Development	£5,000	£8,000	Youth intervention work in Ballymurphy and surrounding areas.
Crimestoppers	Safer Communities	N/A	£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	£2,500	Education/support programme for LGBTQIA+ community.
Crossfire Trust	Creating Safer Communities	£2,000	£3,000	Ex-prisoner engagement in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.
Dialogue for Diversity	Support and Encouragement for ex-prisoners through mentoring	£3,000	£7,500	Ex-prisoner support with aim of preventing reoffending.
Downpatrick Cricket Club	Downpatrick Wicketz Project	£2,000	£3,000	Youth diversionary project through sport.
Dungannon United Youth	Diversionary football programme	£2,000	N/A	Youth engagement through sport to reduce anti-social behaviour and crime.
Edgarstown Residents Association	LADS (Let's All Do Something)	£3,000	£5,000	Youth diversionary programme in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area.
Excellence Through Exercise and Learning	The Game Changers Project	£3,000	£3,000	Community engagement programme targeting young people in disadvantaged areas in Derry City & Strabane District Council area.
Falls Community Council	Community Safety Programme	£4,000	£8,000	Community safety and diversionary activities in Colin, Greater Falls, Upper Falls & Springfield areas of Belfast.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Fermanagh Women's Aid and Omagh Women's Aid	Right to be Safe	N/A	£12,500	Provision of domestic abuse safety sessions across Fermanagh and Omagh areas.
Flourish NI	Resilient Survivors and Communities	£9,000	£18,000	Targeted support for victims of modern slavery to prevent re-exploitation.
Grace Women's Development Ltd	Safer Community Project	£1,440	£1,440	Advisory programme for vulnerable community members in North Belfast.
Greater Shantallow Community Arts	The Viral Project	£8,000	£8,000	Cybercrime awareness programme in Derry City & Strabane District Council area.
Groundwork NI	Groundwork NI ARCS Project	£3,000	£8,000	Engagement project focused on young men at risk of committing crime.
Holy Family Youth Centre	Increase the Peace	£3,000	£6,000	Addressing anti-social behaviour in North Belfast.
Holy Trinity Youth Centre	Enhancing Civic Responsibility	£5,000	£5,000	Targeting young people in Upper Springfield area promoting benefits of civically responsible lifestyles.
Hope for Justice	Spot the Signs – e-learning course	£5,000	£7,500	Raise awareness of MSHT.
Impact Network NI	Cybersafe	£4,000	£8,000	Cybersecurity awareness project aimed at school children.
Irish FA Foundation	Stay Onside - Community Safety Project	£5,400	£20,820	Youth divisionary programme targeting young people at risk of involvement in organised crime and paramilitary activity.
Kinship Care Northern Ireland (Kinship Care NI)	Thrive Project	£7,000	£14,000	Targeted interventions for Looked After Children.
Ledley Hall Boys and Girls Club Trust Ltd	Ledley Hall Boys and Girls Club Trust Ltd ARCS Project	£2,000	N/A	Community outreach project in East Belfast.
Lisburn YMCA	UP2U	£3,500	£10,000	Youth intervention focused on sexual exploitation, coercion and violence against women.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Love Life Counselling NI	Education and Prevention of Crime in the Community	£4,000	£8,000	Programme supporting victims and educating offenders of anti-social behaviour and violent and sexual offences – Lurgan and surrounding areas.
Men’s Action Network	Re: Connections	£5,000	N/A	Engagement with ex-prisoners to reduce reoffending.
Migrant Helpline	Support Through Sport	£4,000	N/A	Support for victims of modern slavery & human trafficking through sport.
Monkstown Boxing Club	In Your Corner Project	£5,500	£10,000	Diversionary and intervention programme – Monkstown and Rathcoole communities.
MUSE Counselling and Wellbeing Support Services	Breaking the Cycle	£4,000	£8,000	Providing support to prisoners on release from HMP Magilligan Prison.
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)	In Ctrl	£10,000	£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	£5,000	£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	£2,500	£5,000	Crime reduction workshops and outreach programme in Newry.
Nexus	Bystander Training	£5,000	£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	£3,000	£7,000	Music therapy to ex-prisoners residing in hostel accommodation.
NI Off Road Training	Stay Safe Moto Challenge	£5,000	£10,000	Diversionary programme for at risk youths.
Northern Ireland Alternatives	Police and Community Engagement (PACE)	£7,000	£14,000	Restorative practice initiative across several NI Council areas.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
On Street Community Youth	Positive Leader Programme 2022-2024	£4,000	£8,000	Youth engagement programme in Galliagh area.
Orchardville	Orchardville Crime Prevention & Safety Project	£8,000	£16,000	Scam & online safety programme for people with a learning disability.
Parenting NI	Walking on Eggshells	£8,500	£20,000	Community based project, addressing child to parent violence across NI.
Passionist Peace and Reconciliation Office	North Belfast Crime Prevention: Connecting Generations	£3,000	£6,000	Engagement across interface areas of North Belfast.
PeacePlayers - Northern Ireland	Cross Community Interface League	£8,000	£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	£5,000	£12,500	Drug and alcohol awareness sessions targeting young people.
Portadown Wellness Centre	Providing Support & Positivity for our Community	£3,000	N/A	Diversionary and support programme.
Portadown 2000	Portadown Youth Diversionary Project	£3,000	£6,000	Youth diversionary programme.
Portrush Sea Cadet Unit	Youth intervention programme	£1,000	£2,000	Youth intervention programme - Portrush.
Prison Arts Foundation	ARTernatives	£4,000	£8,000	Prisoner engagement project through art.
PSNI - Scamwise NI Partnership	Scams Awareness – Older Persons and non-digitally enabled groups	£9,000	£24,000	Scam prevention awareness targeted at older people vulnerable to scams through appropriate media.
Rainbow Child and Family Centre	Empowered Youth	£2,000	£3,000	Youth education programme targeting at risk young people in the Galliagh area.
Rathfriland Cross Community Amateur Boxing Club	Roll with the Punches	£2,000	£4,000	Youth Intervention/restorative justice programme.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
Saints Youth Centre	Youth Intervention Programme for the Colin Area	£3,000	N/A	Youth intervention programme - West Belfast.
Scotch Street Youth and Community Centre	FUSION Project	£1,500	£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	£2,500	£5,000	Youth diversionary programme through sport.
SOS Bus NI	SOS Response Team	£7,000	£20,000	On street support services for potential vulnerable people around Belfast.
Spanner in the Works Theatre Company	Do you see yourself	N/A	£6,000	Educational workshops and online campaign on various predominant crimes.
Start360	Reps, Rounds and Recovery	£4,000	£8,000	Intervention project in Antrim & Newtownabbey Council area.
St Columbs Park Reconciliation Trust	Back Lane Project	£3,000	£5,000	Community engagement programme.
St. Peters Immaculata Youth Centre	Tackling Citizenship in Contested Spaces	£5,800	£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	£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	£3,000	£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	£3,000	Youth restorative initiative – Ballymoney area.
The Link Family and community Centre	Assets to Recovery	£3,000	£6,000	Supporting adults with drug and alcohol dependency in Ards & North Down Council area.

Applicant – Organisation	Title of Project	Funding Offered 2022/23	Funding Offered 2023/24	Summary of Project
The Men's Advisory Project	Supporting men who have faced and are facing interfamilial abuse	£7,500	£15,000	Domestic abuse – support programme.
The Prince's Trust	Building Youth Resilience to Crime	£5,000	£10,000	Youth intervention programme.
The Right Key	Counselling & Creative Therapies Programme Development	£4,000	£8,000	Workshops aiming to reduce re-offending.
Vineyard Compassion	Link Logs	£3,000	£6,000	Ex-Prisoner engagement to reduce reoffending.
White Ribbon NI	Listen , Learn , Lead Youth Workshop	£5,000	£10,000	Community engagement and raising awareness about violence against women & girls.
Women's Aid Armagh Down	Safe At Home 2	£10,000	N/A	Home safety measures for victims of domestic & sexual abuse.
YMCA Portadown	Youth In Action	£3,000	£3,000	Intervention programme for young people in West Portadown Area.
YMCA North Down	Bangor City Centre Youth Engagement Project	£1,160	£4,000	Youth engagement project in Bangor.
Newry Street Unite*	Crime prevention in the Newry Street area, Killeel	£2,000	N/A	Multi-generational crime prevention educational programme.

***Additional funding offered January 2023**



**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.

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 on 31st March 2023. This was a free event, open to members of the public where they were encouraged to drop in and talk to Department of Justice staff who were one of the exhibitors there 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 2021/22

The Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment 2021/22 was published on 4th September 2023. 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.

OCTF AT BALMORAL SHOW IN MAY 2022

OCTF joined with PSNI and others at the Balmoral Show in May 2022. 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. As well direct engagement, a range of OCTF branded promotional goods were distributed alongside relevant information leaflets and helpline numbers.



OCTF partner agencies (PSNI, Department of Justice and NIEA) represented at the Balmoral Show.



Border Force dog demonstrated his skills at the Balmoral Show and helped raise public awareness of how Border Force secures the UK at ports and airports.

OP PANGEA XV

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 XV took place in a week of action from 23rd – 30th June 2022 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 over 242,000 illegal and unlicensed tablets purchased online and destined for addresses throughout Northern Ireland. Multiple

packages of tablets with a street value of almost £250,000 were intercepted and seized. The quantity seized represents a significant increase in seizures compared to previous years (just over 90,000 tablets in 2021). Fifteen people were 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. Pregabalin (known as Lyrica) which is used as an anticonvulsant and to reduce pain and anxiety was also seized, as was Alprazolam (known by its brand name XANAX) which is illegal in the UK. Steroids were also seized.

A media event took place on 20th July where the then Ministers of Justice and Health and 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.



Ministers of Justice and Health and PSNI representatives attend Op Pangea's media event, showing the illicit pharmaceuticals seized during the week of action.

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 Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC)
 - 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 Authority (SIA)
 - 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: NI EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME ON PARAMILITARISM AND ORGANISED CRIME (EPPOC)

Recent data from the NI 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 NI 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.

In the financial year 2024/25 the Programme is investing £16 million 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 NI 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 the Mid and East Antrim Youth Support Hub. This project involves the creation of a multi-agency youth stream of the Mid and East Antrim Support Hub to support young people (up to 25 years) who are at risk of being involved with, influenced by, or exploited by paramilitary gangs.

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:

- **Political Leadership** – demonstrating clear political leadership through active support for the Programme’s values and outcomes, linking these to other political priorities;
- **Partnerships & Alignment** – consciously aligning with other strategies and policies;
- **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;
- **Locality working** – maximising the use of existing resources in particular areas and drawing on local expertise and connections;
- **Research & Best Practice** – harnessing data/evidence to understand the problem and to develop solutions that work and provide a sound basis for investment; and
- **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’ /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 Northern Ireland Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime 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. Illegal money lending is a growing issue and in Northern Ireland it is another tactic for paramilitary groups to control communities.

Unfortunately, this is often seen as normalised behaviour and the lenders are seen as providing some type of community service. 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 that over two thirds of respondents agreed that people who receive loans from local money lenders/ paramilitary groups should be considered victims. Almost nine in ten (87%) agreed that the ads show the real consequences of borrowing money from paramilitaries/illegal money lenders. From the advertising, nine in ten respondents agreed that paramilitary groups/illegal money lenders exploit people and hold them forever in their debt. Most participants (87%) agreed that the ads would put them off considering borrowing from paramilitaries/ illegal money lenders.

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

To find out more about the NI Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme or their 'Ending the Harm' public awareness campaign, please visit their website 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

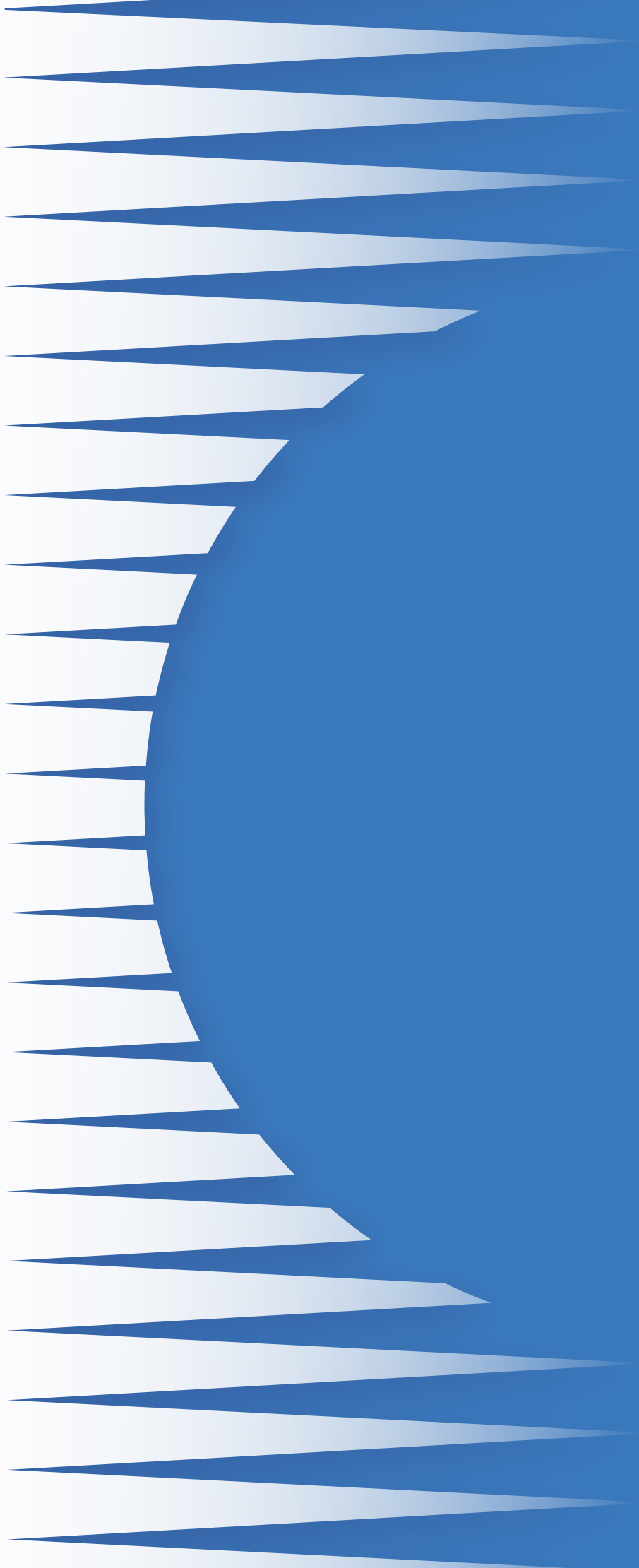
www.daera-ni.gov.uk

PCSPs (Policing and Community Safety Partnerships)

www.pcsp.org

Trading Standards Service

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



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