

An inspection of the effectiveness of the Regional Organised Crime Units

This was an HMICFRS thematic inspection examining how effectively and efficiently the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) tackle the threat from serious and organised crime (SOC). Five ROCUs were attended in February, March and September 2020 as part of the inspection; this did not include the South West ROCU. The report was published on 10th February 2021 and a response is due by 7th April 2021.

Key findings:

Lack of a sustainable funding model – Highlighted as a ‘cause of concern’

- Business leads find it difficult to plan, staff face uncertainty about the tenure of their posts, ROCUs struggle to attract and retain talent based on fixed term arrangements and they can't invest effectively in specialist capabilities
- Feedback from frontline staff to senior managers, and national leads consistently identified funding as the top concern
- Local interests, rather than regional and national threat, risk and harm, affects prioritisation

A single, whole system approach

- In general, ROCUs had good access to intelligence and performed well and were developing performance regimes and management information systems
- ROCUs were focussed on the ‘pursue’ principle, and less on the ‘prevent’, ‘protect’ and ‘prepare’ principles, in tackling organised crime
- In some cases, ROCUs were dealing with threats that were of a lower level, compared with police forces

Accountability and oversight

- There is no effective national oversight framework capable of mandating what the ROCU network should do, resulting in inconsistencies and the potential to undermine national and regional tasking and co-ordination
- More needs to be done nationally and regionally, to ensure that the structure and leadership of the ROCU network is consistent and can effectively tackle the threat of SOC
- There were some examples of innovative work being shared locally and between specialists – more could be done to ensure that ROCUs implement good practice nationally
- Lack of awareness or evidence of counter-corruption measures across the ROCU network was concerning – some ROCUs had plans to tackle corruption but this was not consistent across the network
- More needs to be done to co-ordinate national messages to the public about SOC to raise public awareness of the threat

Recommendations

The report makes seven recommendations, two of which apply to chief constables which are shown below. The recommendation around the 'cause of concern' (funding model) has also been included for completeness.

- By February 2022, chief officers responsible for SOC in each region, with the chief officers of the affected forces, should make sure that systems are in place for senior investigating officers (SIOs) and lead responsible officers (LROs) to work effectively together
- By February 2022, the chief constable with the lead for SOC in each region, with the chief officers of the affected forces, should ensure that a chief officer is appointed with responsibility for each ROCU, as far as practicable working autonomously of force responsibilities
- By February 2022, the Home Office should lead work with the NPCC and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) to identify a sustainable funding model for ROCUs that:
 - Provides long term clarity and certainty to the financial position of ROCUs, to allow for future business planning and more financial stability; and
 - Enables ROCUs to lead the response to SOC in their region

The full report can be viewed here:

<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/an-inspection-of-the-effectiveness-of-the-regional-organised-crime-units/>

Chief Constable's comments

I welcome the report and have discussed the report and the recommendations made within the report with colleagues across the region. It is clear that the workings of the South West ROCU, mindful of the recommendations of HMICFRS, is working particularly effectively.

There have been many successful operations between South West ROCU and Devon and Cornwall Police. Following an investigation into an organised crime group who were trafficking Albanian men and women into Teignbridge harbour to be exploited, a multi-agency operation led by South West ROCU and supported by Devon and Cornwall Police, Border Force, Immigration Enforcement and the National Crime Agency resulted in three people being charged and eight victims of trafficking being safeguarded. Project Vizardlike was an investigation into the supply of firearms across the region and in 2018 a male was arrested and later charged with armed robbery. A joint investigation linked him to the sale of a Glock blank firing weapon. During warrants, other firearms component parts were discovered. A further operation in Bude, Cornwall led to more warrants and the seizure of pistols, component parts and ammunition. The Regional Disruption Team (RDT) lead on the response to Fast Parcels tackling the importation of illegal weapons, firearms and substances into Devon and Cornwall. South West ROCU have conducted intelligence checks and research on 1124 referrals from Border Force since the 1st January 2021. Working together with Devon and Cornwall police the RDT has investigated 62 linked to child-like sex dolls, imitation firearms, knives, stun guns and drugs. Over the past 3 years the South West ROCU have worked with Devon and Cornwall Police to combat the threat posed by Child

Exploitation online. We work closely with specialist teams to identify those who target the most vulnerable in society. These have included supporting 18 arrests and safeguarding 10 children.

I have formally written to HMICFRS particularly in respect of recommendation 1, with which I do not agree. The ROCU is not a corporation sole or a formal body established in addition to Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners. The NCA currently has sufficient powers to task the ROCUs should it require to and direct Chief Constables who with PCCs own the ROCUs. There is already sufficient legislation in place and the other recommendations with the report are far more likely to address any issue than the concept of the legislation proposed.

I support the wider elements of the report and its recommendations. I will be working with regional colleagues to support the delivery of the recommendations.

Police and Crime Commissioner's response

I welcome this report, which highlights the significant issue of the need for a clear and sustainable funding model for Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU), as well as detailing much of the good work carried out by ROCUs and police forces to tackle serious and organised crime nationally.

In addition to addressing funding issues, the report makes a number of recommendations around improved intelligence sharing and joint working between ROCU's, police forces and the National Crime Agency (NCA), as well as more co-ordinated national guidance, strategy and tasking. Whilst I welcome proposed solutions that aim to bolster the sharing of intelligence and bring a consistency of practice across the ROCU network, I recognise the Chief Constable's views on the appropriateness of recommendation 1. In my role as Police and Crime Commissioner, I am responsible for securing an efficient and effective police force for Devon and Cornwall, and for holding the Chief Constable to account for the running of the force. My concern is that any legislation which gives more power to the NCA to direct ROCUs, will risk undermining both the legitimacy and autonomy of Chief Constables, and consequently that of Police and Crime Commissioners, who are elected by the public to carry out their role.

In addition, I would also emphasise the value of local and regional knowledge and autonomy in tackling serious and organised crime, reflected in the Chief Constable's comments around the achievements of the South West ROCU (which I note was not visited as part of this inspection).

The report also highlights issues and makes a recommendation around the need for ROCU leads to be able to undertake their role autonomously of force responsibilities, to ensure independent decision making. I am pleased to confirm that for the South West ROCU this practice is already in place.

I will be seeking further assurance from the Chief Constable that Devon and Cornwall will be well served through the South West ROCU, and that the service in terms of tackling serious

and organised crime will continue to be enhanced for the residents of our two counties, as the report's recommendations are taken forward.