

CROSS BORDER JOINT AGENCY TASK FORCE



Summary Report

1st April 2020 – 30th September 2020



NCA
National Crime Agency

**CRIMINAL
ASSETS
BUREAU**



**HM Revenue
& Customs**

**Immigration
Enforcement**

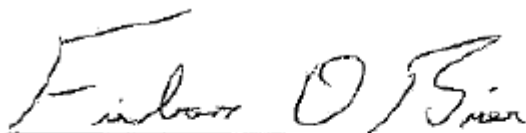
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Foreword

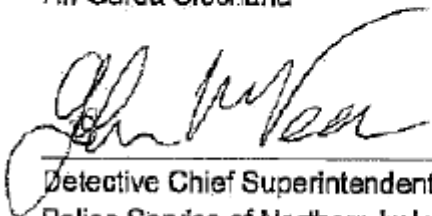
As the joint Chairs of the Operational Co-ordination Group, we are pleased to provide the ninth Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force report, which covers the period from the 1st April to the 30th September 2020.

The report highlights continued high levels of co-operation and operational activity between all the various Law Enforcement Agencies involved in tackling the six priority areas affecting Rural Crime, Drugs, Financial Crime, Trafficking in Human Beings including Children, Excise Fraud and Organised Immigration Crime. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted crime and illicit economies such as organised crime, online crime, illegal markets and smuggling, human trafficking, robberies and burglaries and has added to the workload of law enforcement agencies. There are a number of challenges and emerging issues arising within these important areas that the agencies are dealing with.

The Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force was set up to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime. In order to do this, it is widely accepted that partner agencies working together collaboratively is the most effective way to protect the public from the threat and harm caused by organised criminality. We are very grateful that all the members of the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force are strongly committed to achieving this and continue to work together to keep the people and communities on this island safe.



Assistant Commissioner Finbarr O'Brien
An Garda Síochána



Detective Chief Superintendent John Mc Vea
Police Service of Northern Ireland

2. Background and Operational Parameters

2.1 In November 2015, the British and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive agreed a series of measures in 'A Fresh Start', the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan. One of these measures was the creation of a Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force as part of "a concerted and enhanced effort to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime."

2.2 The "Cross Border Policing Strategy" acts as the over-arching delivery strategy for the work of the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force, which consists of a Strategic Oversight Group and an Operations Co-ordination Group.

2.3 The Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force Strategic Oversight Group is jointly chaired by Deputy Commissioner John Twomey, An Garda Síochána and Assistant Chief Constable Barbara Gray, Police Service of Northern Ireland. The purpose of this group is to provide strategic direction.

2.4 The Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force Operations Co-Ordination Group is jointly chaired by Assistant Commissioner Finbarr O'Brien from An Garda Síochána and Detective Chief Superintendent John Mc Vea from the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The purpose of this group is to provide oversight in respect of frontline operational activity and has been functioning operationally since 4th April, 2016.

2.5 In accordance with the provisions of the Agreement, this report details the work of the task force and is to be presented to the meeting of Justice Ministers under the framework of the Intergovernmental Agreement on co-operation on criminal justice matters.

2.6 At an operational level, all agencies have been working on delivering results and more operational activity is planned in the months ahead. The objective of the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force is to build on existing frameworks and to increase the collective effectiveness within existing operational and financial constraints.

2.7 Based on an agreed strategic assessment and prioritising against threat, harm and risk, it was agreed to adopt 6 priority areas for the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force.

2.8 The following six priority areas have been formally ratified by the Strategic Oversight Group and will be subject of review.

1. Rural Crime
2. Drugs
3. Financial Crime
4. Trafficking in Human Beings Including Children
5. Excise Fraud
6. Organised Immigration Crime

Summary Report

The following is a synopsis of the successes (1st April – 30th September 2020 inclusive) undertaken by the Cross Border Joint Agency Task Force (JATF) linked to the six priority areas.

Rural Crime

Close cross border co-operation has continued during this reporting period in spite of the Coronavirus pandemic. Cross border investigations have occurred across a number of crime types including burglary, armed robbery, hijacking, ATM thefts, Livestock thefts and cruelty to animals. An Garda Síochána and PSNI officers also assisted colleagues in other agencies to conduct operations on suspected criminals linked to other Cross Border JATF priority areas.

In 2019, there was a series of ATM thefts on both sides of the border. One of the main Organised Crime Gangs (OCGs) had members living close to the border in both Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The OCG continued to plan and attempt to commit ATM thefts in the spring of 2020 during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic. After the theft of two ATM's in Dundalk in April 2020, on the ground co-operation, between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI tracked two males to a house in South Armagh where they were arrested and later charged by the PSNI in relation to the ATM thefts. In the Republic of Ireland, five other male persons were arrested and charged with ATM offences linked to this OCG and appeared before the Special Criminal Court, Dublin during this recording period.

Drugs

This reporting period witnessed three large Law Enforcement Agency (LEA) interventions on both sides of the Irish Sea resulting in approximately €9.7 million of drugs being seized. The first intervention was in County Dublin in April 2020, when 36kg of cocaine was located in a van which was driven by a person who resided in Northern Ireland. Two suspects were arrested, interviewed and charged by An Garda Síochána. The second intervention occurred as a result of a search at Dublin Port when 62kg of cocaine and 93kg of herbal cannabis was found inside a trailer being driven by a Northern Irish driver. The third significant intervention was on the 10th September 2020, when £1 million of cocaine destined for Northern Ireland via Dublin Port was intercepted and seized by the NCA.

In total, as a result of close collaboration during this reporting period between LEA's on both sides of the border, 18 arrests for drugs offences were made; 20 suspects were charged; 73 searches were conducted; €1,282,670 million was seized and drugs worth €9.7 million was taken off our streets. We also witnessed the culmination of a two and a half year investigation in relation to a Lithuanian OCG who had been distributing heroin onto the streets of a number of cities and towns on the island of Ireland. A Eurojust JIT Day of Action was coordinated on the 26th August 2020, resulting in arrests and searches across three jurisdictions namely Lithuania, Ireland and Northern Ireland. The joint operation led to 18 arrests, 65 searches and over €700,000 being seized.

Financial Crime

There are a total of 15 Financial Crime investigations ongoing under the auspices of the Cross Border JATF. The investigations are being conducted by the PSNI, An Garda Síochána, CAB and the NCA, supported by HMRC, the Revenue Commissioners and incorporate a range of predicate criminal offending including Drug Trafficking, Cigarette Smuggling, Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking, Theft and Fraud. In addition to criminal investigation powers, non-conviction based asset recovery powers are also being utilised in both jurisdictions to disrupt OCGs and recover the proceeds of crime.

In this reporting period there have been a total of 24 arrests linked to financial crime investigations, in excess of 80 investigative orders have been granted, 2 defendants have pleaded guilty to money laundering/fraud offences and one Proceeds of Crime Order has been granted. Collaborative working between partner Agencies and the international exchange of information via Joint Investigation Teams, Europol, Eurojust and Financial Intelligence Units has been particularly beneficial in assisting and supporting the progress and development of these investigations.

Trafficking in Human Beings including Children

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the ability of An Garda Síochána and the PSNI to carry out joint operations during this reporting period. Nevertheless, six new cross border investigations commenced ranging from the exploitation of sex workers to the labour exploitation of human beings in relation to work at car washes. The PSNI Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) and An Garda Síochána Human Trafficking

Investigation & Co Ordination Unit (HTICU) recorded 76 persons who have presented during the period as potential victims of Human Trafficking in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In August 2020, a major operation was put in place by An Garda Síochána and the PSNI, when eight individuals were arrested; five in the Republic of Ireland and three in Northern Ireland in relation to a Lithuanian OCG. 18 potential victims of human trafficking had been identified as been targeted in Lithuania for their vulnerability and brought to the island of Ireland to sell drugs on behalf of the OCG. Statements have been recorded and evidence shared with the Lithuanian police.

Excise Fraud

There are currently seven cross border Excise Fraud investigations that are being pursued by the authorities on both sides of the border. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected some OCG's in terms of their illicit production facilities due to the international restrictions involving the movement of people during the reporting period. This situation is assessed as being temporary and illicit production remains a significant threat. The smuggling of marked Northern Irish kerosene oil into the Republic of Ireland continues to be an issue.

In May 2020, a multi-agency operation in collaboration with Dutch authorities targeted and searched properties on both sides of the border. Three suspects were arrested and two persons were later charged in Northern Ireland with Excise offences. 5.6 million of Regina brand cigarettes valued at £1.7 million were seized in Northern Ireland, whilst 4.2 tonnes of counterfeit tobacco, machinery and €97,000 cash was seized in the Republic of Ireland. Also in May during another operation, 17.4 million of illicit cigarettes were seized by the Irish Revenue Commissioners coming from the Netherlands linked to another cross border OCG. In September 2020, a search of a lorry at Cairnryan Port travelling to Northern Ireland discovered 3 tonnes of Flandria and Golden Virginia tobacco valued at £700,000.

Organised Immigration Crime

There are five cross border Immigration operations ongoing and they are being managed effectively by the sharing of intelligence and good collaborative partnerships between the respective agencies. The operations include a Kuwaiti national coordinating unlawful

immigration into the United Kingdom from mainland Europe via Dublin. He was convicted and sentenced to six years imprisonment.

In August 2020 further arrests were made in Northern Ireland and Scotland regarding other suspects. There is also an investigation into the activities of an OCG facilitating Albanian nationals to enter the Republic of Ireland to claim international protection. Additionally, investigative support is continuing to be provided to Essex Police in relation to the deaths of 39 Vietnamese nationals.