

National Crime Agency inspection

An inspection of the National Crime Agency's relationship with regional organised crime units

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Summary

This was an inspection of the National Crime Agency (NCA), not of the police or the regional organised crime units (ROCU). We sought to establish how effectively the NCA works with one of its most important partners, the ROCU network, to tackle serious and organised crime. We are exploring the wider serious and organised crime network through our current inspection programme, including inspecting ROCUs and exploring serious and organised crime management in forces through our [PEEL inspections](#).

This is a largely encouraging report, which found that the NCA and ROCUs work well together in some areas of law enforcement. The NCA operates nationally and internationally to tackle serious and organised crime. ROCUs operate at a regional level and work with local forces and the NCA. It is crucial that these two bodies work together effectively to tackle serious and organised criminals.

These two organisations work well together in some areas, including the specialist services that the NCA provides, such as protected persons and kidnap and extortion. These are used effectively by the ROCU network. But the NCA and the ROCUs could work together better to reduce the risk of serious and organised criminality – for example, by improving joint tasking procedures at a local level and developing more co-location or integration in some branch offices.

We have made seven recommendations for improving how well the NCA works with the ROCU network.

Collaboration arrangements between the NCA and ROCUs

The NCA and ROCUs have an effective meeting structure that we found helped maintain strong organisational links. This is reinforced, in some regions, by local meetings, informal relationships and effective regional organised crime co-ordinator (ROCC) engagement.

We found significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in both the NCA and the ROCUs. These include staff moving between the two organisations, the lack of development and training, and the need for more national co-ordination of specialist police career pathways.

The NCA has a project to reform its current tasking process. We recommend a change to existing legislation, which will allow the director general of the NCA to formally task the ROCUs and set appropriate priorities.

Regional organised crime co-ordinators

ROCCs will play an important part in the new NCA tasking process, once introduced. Past under-investment in this role will need to change if this is to work effectively. There are now fewer ROCCs, meaning that they are less effective and less able to engage with the ROCU network. The NCA has acknowledged this and is looking to increase the number of ROCCs.

Co-ordination and support of operational activity

The roles and responsibilities of each law enforcement organisation – including the NCA, police forces and ROCUs – in dealing with a specific threat are set out in an NCA document. This should be circulated and promoted to all law enforcement agencies, and regularly reviewed with partners to ensure that the content is current.

We believe that the NCA should invest in its control room, so that it can manage the agency's resources effectively. We found that the control room does not always have a clear picture of where staff are operationally deployed and what resources it has available. This raises concerns about staff safety and welfare. We found this to be a cause for concern but note that the NCA has recognised the issue and is seeking to address it as a matter of urgency.

Local [police and crime commissioners](#) (PCCs) and chief constables hold ROCUs to account and are responsible for their main funding. ROCUs therefore face pressure to operate to the priorities of chief constables and PCCs, rather than national priorities. Funding is complex, with ROCUs also receiving national funding. This sometimes creates a tension between the NCA's work and that of the ROCU network.

Specialist capabilities and support provided by the NCA

The NCA provides specialist services to the ROCU network such as witness protection and responding to cases of kidnap and extortion. Generally, these services could not be provided effectively or efficiently at a force or regional level. The ROCU network uses them well, in most cases, although ROCUs were sometimes unsure how to access specialist NCA capabilities. We found very few examples of operations that were escalated to the NCA for investigation.

The NCA's ability to prioritise threat and work with ROCUs

The NCA and ROCUs have different ways of defining threat. A common definition would help the two organisations to prioritise work and to allocate the right resources for operations and investigations.

It should be explicit within the tasking process how ROCUs can refer serious investigations to the NCA, including how to access NCA support when needed. The role of the NCA's ROCCs in this process was not clear.

Integration and co-location

We have reported on the importance of co-location in earlier inspections, including our previous one of the ROCUs.¹ We found that the teams are better integrated when they work alongside each other. However, this was not always the case. In one branch office, the ROCU believed that the NCA branch office was a training unit and not an operational branch office. The priority is therefore to integrate the operating practices and relationships between the ROCUs and the NCA. We still believe that co-location can make integration easier but good professional relationships and strong leadership can achieve good operating integration even when co-location is not practical.

Recommendations

We make seven recommendations.

- By 1 March 2021, the Home Office should consider what changes to legislation can be made to allow the National Crime Agency to formally task regional organised crime units.
- By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency should circulate the roles and responsibilities documents to the regional organised crime units and other law enforcement partners, making sure that the documents are regularly reviewed with an effective circulation process in place to ensure that they are understood.
- With immediate effect, the National Crime Agency must make sure that its control room has an effective duty management system so that it can monitor the location and duties of its resources.
- By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency should revise and publish the job description for the regional organised crime co-ordinator role. This should include their involvement in the serious and organised crime system tasking and clearly outline their role in engaging with the regional organised crime unit network.
- By 1 March 2021, the Home Office should conduct a review of the funding arrangements for regional organised crime units (ROCUs) that would reduce barriers to better integrated working between the National Crime Agency and the ROCU network.
- By 31 December 2020, the Home Office, as part of its review of the *Strategic Policing Requirement*, should consider how greater emphasis is placed on national threats such as serious and organised crime by police and crime commissioners and chief constables.
- By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency and the regional organised crime unit network should agree to the use of the NCA method of defining threat and prioritisation.

¹ [Regional Organised Crime Units: A review of capability and effectiveness](#), HMIC, November 2015, p57, recommendation 6.

Introduction

About HMICFRS

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) is an independent inspectorate, required under the Crime and Courts Act 2013 to inspect the National Crime Agency (also referred to as the 'NCA' or the 'agency').² Following an inspection, we must report to the Home Secretary on the efficiency and effectiveness of the NCA.³

Our commission

This inspection of the NCA, our seventh, examines its relationship with the ROCU network. Our terms of reference contain several questions about the NCA's relationship with the ROCUs.

This report does not contain our graded judgments (outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate) for the NCA, although it does make recommendations which, if acted on, will help the NCA to be more effective and so better able to protect the public from serious and organised crime.

We are grateful to NCA branch commanders and heads of ROCUs for their engagement throughout this inspection.

Context

The NCA

The NCA is a national law enforcement agency in the UK. It is the UK's lead agency against organised crime; human, weapon and drug trafficking; cyber-crime; and economic crime that goes across regional and international borders. It can also be tasked to investigate any crime. It has a strategic role in which it looks at the bigger picture across the UK, analysing how criminals are operating and how they can be disrupted. To do this, it works closely with ROCUs and the Serious Fraud Office as well as individual police forces.

² Section 11(1), Crime and Courts Act 2013.

³ Section 11(3), Crime and Courts Act 2013.

The NCA is a non-ministerial department, which means that it operates as a government department but does not have its own dedicated minister. Instead, it is headed by the director general, who is accountable to the Home Secretary. The director general has independent operational command of NCA activities.

The NCA concentrates its work on the most serious criminals and organised crime groups. This crime is usually sophisticated and far-reaching in scale and effect.

The agency offers national technical or specialist capability to support other law enforcement agencies. Significant threats include:

- cyber-crime;
- economic crime and money laundering;
- child sexual exploitation;
- organised immigration crime, human trafficking and modern slavery;
- drugs trafficking;
- criminal use of firearms; and
- acquisitive crime and fraud.

Within the NCA, 'Regional Operations' was formed in October 2013 and has developed strong partnerships with ROCUs. It is an integral part of the regional response to serious and organised crime. Crucially, it gives local forces the means to access specialist capabilities to tackle serious and organised crime. It helps to connect the national, regional and local response to serious and organised crime. It is set up across England and Wales to cover the ten policing regions. These are:

- North East;
- Yorkshire and the Humber;
- North West;
- Wales;
- West Midlands;
- East Midlands;
- East of England;
- South West;
- London; and
- South East.

The ROCU network

ROCUs form a critical part of the national policing network. Their importance is emphasised in the cross-government [Serious and Organised Crime Strategy 2018](#) and the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#), which says that the "ROCUs are the primary interface between the NCA and policing, supporting the co-ordination and tasking of the collective effort against the serious and organised crime threat". They offer forces specialist policing capabilities to tackle serious and organised crime effectively. These include undercover policing, specialist surveillance and cyber-crime investigation.

ROCUs investigate and disrupt organised crime groups operating across police force boundaries. Some support investigations into other types of crime such as homicide and kidnap. They also act as an important point of connection between police forces and the NCA. By their nature, many ROCU activities are carried out away from the public eye. ROCUs conduct sensitive and sometimes covert operations. Yet their work plays a vital part in protecting the public from serious and organised crime.

In 2010, nine ROCUs were created across England and Wales outside London:

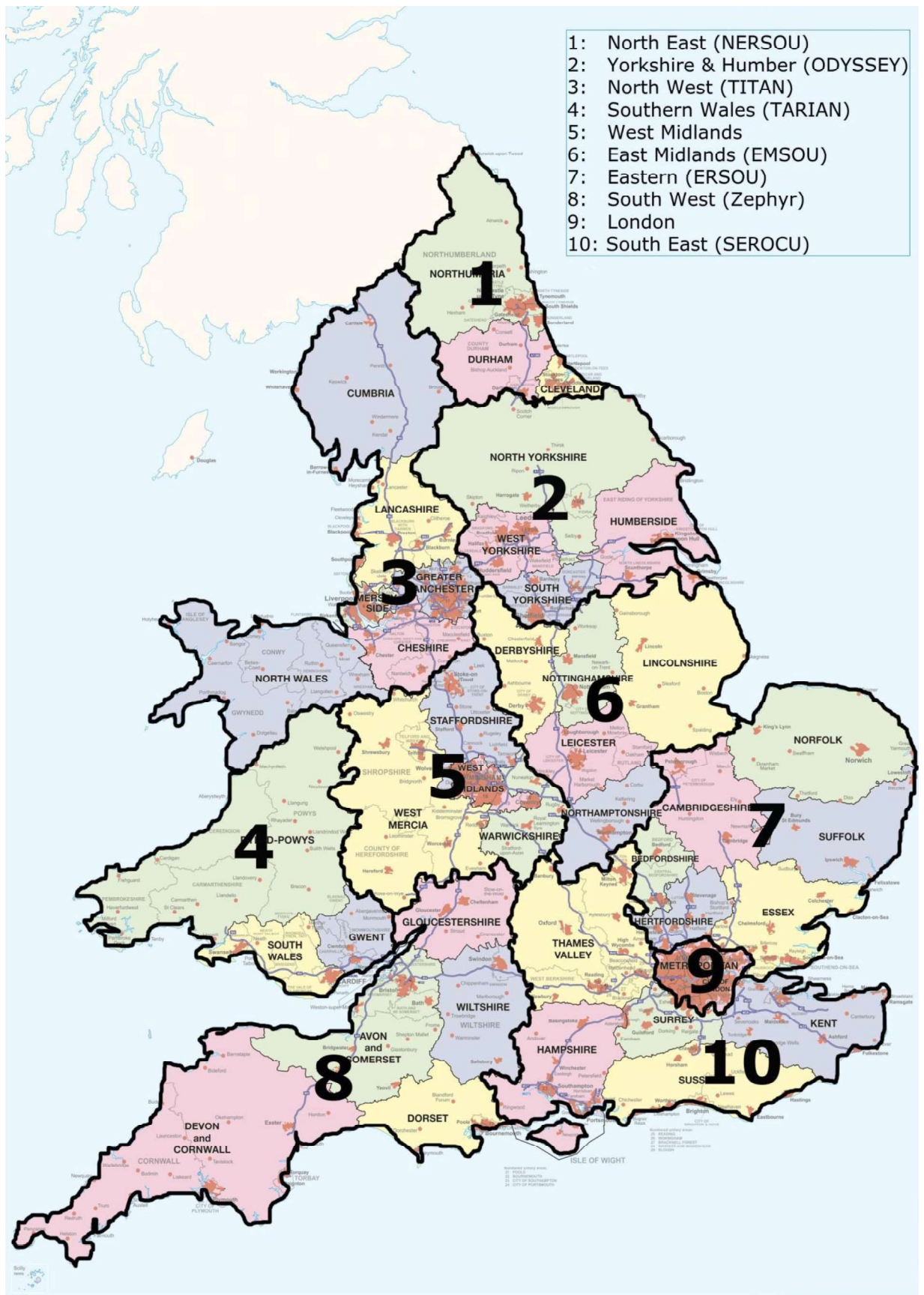
- ERSOU (Eastern England) serves Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Hertfordshire, Essex and Kent.
- EMSOU (East Midlands) serves Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire.
- NERSOU (North East) serves Northumbria, Durham and Cleveland.
- ODYSSEY (Yorkshire and the Humber) serves North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and Humberside.
- SEROCU (South East) serves Thames Valley, Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex.
- TARIAN (Southern Wales) serves Dyfed-Powys, South Wales and Gwent.
- TITAN (North West) serves Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire and North Wales.
- VIPER (West Midlands) serves West Mercia, West Midlands, Staffordshire and Warwickshire.
- ZEPHYR (South West) serves Devon and Cornwall, Dorset, Avon and Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire.

The London ROCU is currently being set up with the constituent forces being the Metropolitan Police Service, City of London Police and British Transport Police.

Each ROCU is supported by a regional intelligence unit made up of police officers and staff from its constituent forces.

Each of the ten ROCUs in England and Wales serves between three and six constituent forces, as shown in the map below.

Figure 1: The ten ROCUs in England and Wales



Funding for ROCUs comes from sources including constituent forces, PCCs (who are the main instrument of local democratic accountability) and grants obtained centrally. This pressure to service many masters directly affects the ROCUs' priorities.

The NCA has a complex network of relationships. It is a national organisation with an international reach. It must work with 45 police forces as well as ROCUs, PCCs and other partners. The NCA and the ROCU network were developed at different times and therefore not designed with each other in mind.

The ROCUs all have different structures and capabilities. Some investigate certain types of homicide offences.⁴ Others manage and investigate kidnap and extortion. They operate through collaboration agreements between chief constables and PCCs,⁵ although ROCUs have no legal status beyond these agreements.

Serious and organised crime

Serious and organised crime includes human trafficking, drug trafficking, organised illegal immigration, high-value fraud and other serious financial crimes, counterfeiting, organised theft, burglary or robbery and cyber-crime. It is perpetrated by groups of people operating collaboratively on a continuing basis, typically in order to realise substantial financial gain and sometimes with the use of serious violence. These are known as 'organised crime groups'.

Serious and organised crime is the subject of a cross-government strategy, which in addition to the crime types listed above also covers the serious – although not necessarily organised – offences of child sexual exploitation and certain other kinds of fraud. Serious and organised crime is one of several forms of crime that present a serious risk to the UK's national security.

The director general of the NCA has said that serious and organised crime costs the UK at least £37 billion annually.⁶ Recent assessments indicate that both the volume and complexity of serious and organised crime are increasing and will continue to evolve due to technological advances, international conflict and the impact of Brexit.

⁴ A Category A+ homicide is Category A homicide or other major investigation where public concern and the associated response to media intervention are such that 'normal' staffing levels are not adequate to keep pace with the investigation. A Category A homicide is a homicide or other major investigation that is of grave concern or where vulnerable members of the public are at risk; where the identity of the offender/s is not apparent; or where the investigation and the securing of evidence require significant resource allocation.

⁵ These agreements are made pursuant to section 22A of the Police Act 1996 (as amended), which enables chief officers of police and local policing bodies as defined in that Act and other parties to make an agreement about the discharge of functions by officers and staff, when it is in the interests of the efficiency or effectiveness of their own and other police force areas. In entering into this agreement, the parties have taken account of the statutory guidance for police collaboration published by the Home Office in October 2012 in exercise of the Home Secretary's power under section 23F of the Police Act 1996, to provide guidance about collaboration agreements.

⁶ [181,000 UK offenders fuelling "chronic and corrosive" threat from serious and organised crime](#), NCA, May 2019.

Terms of reference

In drawing up the terms of reference for our inspection, we consulted the director general of the NCA and the Home Office. The NCA has the responsibility to lead, support or co-ordinate the national law enforcement response to serious and organised crime (not including terrorism). Our terms of reference were to consider:

How well does the NCA work with the regional organised crime unit network, to reduce the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK and our communities?

We specifically considered the following questions in the relationship between the NCA and the ROCUs:

- How effective are collaboration arrangements between the NCA and ROCUs?
- How effective are the NCA's regional organised crime co-ordinators (ROCCs) at developing and maintaining the relationship between the NCA and ROCUs?
- How does the NCA's relationship with the ROCUs support their role to lead, task, co-ordinate and support operational activity at local, regional, national and international levels?
- What support does the NCA provide to the ROCUs and is it effective and consistent across the network? What specialist capabilities does the NCA make available to ROCUs and how easy is it to access these?
- How effective is the NCA at prioritising threat from the highest risk serious and organised criminals and engaging with ROCUs to target these through effective use of the capabilities for each agency?
- To what extent is the NCA integrated and/or co-located with the ROCUs to support their 'relentless disruption of serious and organised crime'?

Methodology

Between September and October 2019, we reviewed several documents, policies, procedures and plans relating to the NCA's relationship. We visited ROCUs in England and Wales. The findings from this preparatory work shaped the focus of our fieldwork.

ROCUs form a critical part of the national policing network. They support forces with specialist policing capabilities to help tackle serious and organised crime effectively. Police Scotland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) provide similar specialist policing capabilities in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The NCA's relationships with Police Scotland and PSNI were outside the terms of reference for this inspection.

We visited the NCA centres across England, in the North West, North East, South West, West Midlands and Yorkshire. In each place, we ran a focus group with NCA staff and staff from the corresponding ROCU. We interviewed senior managers and other staff.

Finally, we interviewed the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for ROCUs, deputy directors and directors from the agency.

Pre-inspection planning took place between April and May 2019. The fieldwork took place between October and November 2019.

We reviewed NCA documents before fieldwork started, including:

- the NCA's draft force management statement;
- the National Strategic Assessment (NSA) 2019;
- the 2018 *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy*; and
- other documents relating to NCA intelligence and operating procedures.

We also reviewed presentations given by NCA senior investigating officers for several current investigations.

We observed and interviewed NCA staff and held focus groups with them. Some gave presentations and briefings on their organisation and transformation programme.

We also interviewed and held focus groups with officers from the ROCUs and staff from the National Intelligence Hub, comprising the National Assessment Centre and other specialist departments of the NCA.

Finally, we interviewed the deputy directors and the director of the NCA.

Collaboration arrangements between the NCA and ROCUs

Tasking

Under the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the NCA director general can direct chief officers to assist with NCA activity when necessary. These powers are used rarely but provide a legal basis for requiring forces to work with the NCA. The director general has no power to direct ROCUs. This is an anomaly in legislation. ROCUs are, according to the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#), the primary interface between the NCA and local policing, supporting the co-ordination and tasking of the collective effort against the serious and organised crime threat. In all our interviews, both officers and staff from the ROCUs and the NCA outlined this as an issue that needed a change in the law. In order to ensure that a tasking is carried out, the director general would task the lead force in the collaboration.

Recommendation 1

By 1 March 2021, the Home Office should consider what changes to legislation can be made to allow the National Crime Agency to formally task regional organised crime units.

During our inspection, we found that the national tasking of regional cyber and undercover (online) resources was effective and efficient. The process for tasking is mature. It has been in place for some time and is understood by those involved.

We found local operational tasking meetings where investigations were jointly resourced by the NCA and the ROCU, despite the lack of formal or legislative arrangements. We see this as good practice.

Tasking of ROCU resources is influenced by local policing pressures (sovereignty) in some regions rather than being targeted towards the highest threats identified nationally.

Roles and responsibilities

We found that the roles and responsibilities of the NCA were not understood by many in the ROCU network. This led to some confusion as to what the NCA should be doing and how it could support ROCUs. The NCA has roles and responsibilities grid documents for each of the organisations that work together in areas such as serious and organised crime. These documents describe the responsibilities of different organisations, including the NCA and ROCUs, and state what they can do to deal with various threats. We evaluated these documents during our document review and found them to be fit for purpose.

During our inspection, we only found one person in the ROCU network who was aware of these documents. This is a sign of a wider systemic problem of communicating organisations' responsibilities and what they can contribute to tackling serious and organised crime.

The grid documents set out clearly the roles of the NCA, the ROCUs and other agencies. For example, the firearms grid document specifies the role of the NCA in the national and international arena as follows:

- “Lead, co-ordinate and support tasked investigations into international supply including internet-enabled supply.
- Lead tasking and co-ordination of overseas liaison networks.
- Lead identification of potentially nationally significant firearms intelligence/incidents with links to international supply.
- Lead, collect, develop and assess intelligence on the international supply of firearms into the United Kingdom.”⁷

It specifies the role of the ROCU in the regional context as follows:

- “Support collection/development/assessment of intelligence to identify opportunities for regional/national development opportunities and strategic understanding of the threat.
- Co-ordinate regional and local response to border detection referrals.
- Lead/support investigations against organised crime groups with international firearms links.”⁸

We found that these documents were fit for purpose and effectively specified the different roles and responsibilities of the NCA and the ROCUs. They also specified the roles of other law enforcement agencies. There are similar documents for the following threat areas:

- drugs;
- modern slavery and human trafficking;
- fraud;
- child sexual exploitation; and

⁷ *Firearms roles and responsibilities grid document*, version 1, NCA.

⁸ As before.

- the Metropolitan Police Service's relationship with the agency and primacy of roles.

These documents are not well known outside the agency. The NCA should circulate them to the ROCUs and other law enforcement partners, and ensure that the documents are regularly reviewed.

Recommendation 2

By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency should circulate the roles and responsibilities documents to the regional organised crime units and other law enforcement partners, making sure that the documents are regularly reviewed with an effective circulation process in place to ensure that they are understood.

Control room

Our inspection included the NCA control room. We found that the control room staff had very limited awareness of where the agency's resources were. The control room had to contact each branch office to find out how many NCA officers were on duty at any time. This is not a safe or efficient way to monitor availability. The NCA is also less able to help ROCUs or any other agency if its control room does not know what its staff are doing or where they are deployed. Any request from the ROCUs for urgent assistance through the NCA control room could not be met. This is a cause for concern.

The agency must ensure that its control room knows where its people and resources are and what they are doing. This applies, in particular, to specialist resources. It will require investment to enable the control room duty management system to fulfil its function.

The NCA is aware of these concerns and has a plan to address those that involve the submission of two business cases to support implementing an effective duty management system.

Recommendation 3

With immediate effect, the National Crime Agency must make sure that its control room has an effective duty management system so that it can monitor the location and duties of its resources.

Meeting and relationship arrangements between the NCA and ROCUs

It is important that the NCA, the ROCU network and local policing work well together to reduce the effects of serious and organised crime.

Within the NSA, the NCA is held responsible for the performance of the resources available using the national tasking process. The NCA has a statutory role to lead, support and co-ordinate the fight against serious and organised crime. This is also part of the *Strategic Policing Requirement*.

The constituent forces give resources to ROCUs for their regional collaboration. Some ROCUs share the same building with NCA branch offices. We will explain how this works later in the integration and co-location section of this report.

At all ranks and levels, members of the NCA and ROCUs are keen to work together. Engagement between each agency was effective in some places, with positive operational working and outcomes. In others, it was not effective.

The meeting structure for tasking and co-ordinating operational activity worked well, with ROCUs and the NCA represented at regional and national level. Several formal meetings attended by, among others, both the NCA and the ROCUs contribute positively to the relationship between the two organisations. The groups involved were as follows:

National strategic tasking and co-ordination group (NSTCG)

The NCA director general chairs this group. It meets twice yearly. It reviews the *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime* and agrees national threats and priority, which should then feature in the national control strategy.

National strategic intelligence group (NSIG)

This group also meets twice yearly. It considers the National Strategic Assessment and recommends to the NSTCG the national threats. It also strategically oversees intelligence practices, standards and products.

National tactical tasking and coordination group (NTTCG)

The deputy director general (operations) chairs this group. It meets quarterly. It considers the national tactical assessment for serious and organised crime, and makes sure that the national response is appropriate. It also considers new and emerging threats.

National tactical intelligence group (NTIG)

The deputy director general (intelligence) chairs this. It meets quarterly. It considers the national tactical assessment for serious and organised crime, and assesses progress against national threats and priority threats. It makes recommendations and highlights any new and emerging threats to the NTTCG.

Representatives from the NCA and ROCU work positively together in these meetings. For example, during national strategic tasking and co-ordinating meetings, we saw evidence of effective prioritisation, demand management and direction to organisations. These meetings are attended by the regional chief officer leads for each of the nine ROCUs. In the absence of the legislative tools to directly task a ROCU, the director general can task regional chief officer leads through this meeting.

Safeguarding – transfer of risk

Safeguarding is an important area of policing. The safety of those most vulnerable to harm depends on police forces, the ROCUs and the NCA effectively managing everyday safeguarding risks. It is important that incidents that create a safeguarding concern can be transferred efficiently and effectively between the national, regional and local bodies involved. This requires good communication and operational working. The NCA does not fit easily within the local safeguarding, local authority and health structure because of its national structure. This is where the ROCU network can help.

However, there are some areas where the NCA has an important role and extensive experience within law enforcement. In online child protection, for example, the NCA makes its experience and skills available to police forces and ROCUs. Safeguarding arrangements are clearer and more widely understood when the investigation is specifically focused on child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and investigated in dedicated, specialist teams.

The lack of well-developed local relationships limits the knowledge and experience of safeguarding within the NCA non-specialist CSEA teams. Knowledge and experience in safeguarding were much greater in ROCUs and there was evidence that they were most influential when NCA and ROCU staff worked alongside each other. The ROCU network had contacts within constituent forces that facilitated the management of safeguarding risk. This is an area where the NCA relies on the ROCUs and where the relationship works well.

Regional organised crime co-ordinators

As part of the inspection, we were asked to inspect the effectiveness of the ROCCs. We found that the post was under-resourced, and the responsibilities inconsistent and confused with differing levels of appreciation for the role the ROCC was expected to perform.

The NCA defines the ROCC as “the strategic lead for the deployment of NCA resources to a given threat in the region and they provide a platform for integrating and linking that national, regional and local risk and response. ROCCs proactively identify opportunities to support partners through niche capabilities, planned surges and cross-command and multi-agency collaborative working to ensure the response is agile and targeted at the highest priority risks.”⁹

We found that the ROCC role polarised opinion in the NCA and the ROCUs, with a mixture of both positive and less favourable comments on its effectiveness. The role has changed over the past few years and some staff felt that it had suffered from under-investment. Many ROCCs had developed their own ‘role requirement’ that reflected local priorities and needs. The number of ROCCs had fallen over the past few years and, as a result, they had too large a geographical area to cover. They were described by some as liaison officers, but this was an inadequate description of the role and its responsibility. The description underplayed the benefit ROCCs can have in strengthening the relationship between the NCA and ROCUs. This was a missed opportunity but one that the NCA has now recognised and is keen to address.

We interviewed all the ROCCs and found that they were not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. Over time, we feel that the ROCCs have adapted their role to meet local requirements. They are expected to attend and contribute to around 70 meetings a quarter, including those of the:

- national tactical intelligence group (NTIG);
- regional strategic tasking and co-ordination group;
- regional tactical tasking and co-ordination group;
- regional tactical intelligence group;
- heads of crime or equivalent;
- regional directors of intelligence;
- regional PCCs;
- NCA tasking;
- NCA tasking weekly;

⁹ *Resourcing of ROCC structure*, version 1, NCA, March 2019.

- CITG/ITG;
- investigation command;
- ROCU senior leadership; and
- strategic governance groups.

The NCA intends to retain the post of ROCC. It should publish a clear definition of the role. The ROCC should remain a fundamental element of the engagement and communication between the NCA and ROCUs. They should be integral to the tasking, co-ordination and prioritisation of operational activity. This should include a role in the serious and organised crime system tasking.

The NCA and ROCUs are held to account by established but separate governance systems. ROCCs attend as many of these governance meetings as possible. They provide a link between the ROCU and the NCA. However, there are too few ROCCs to be able to attend all relevant meetings. They need to be seen to achieve the responsibilities of their role. We would encourage the NCA to invest in the ROCC post so that it can meet the new demands placed on it.

Recommendation 4

By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency should revise and publish the job description for the regional organised crime co-ordinator role. This should include their involvement in the serious and organised crime system tasking and clearly outline their role in engaging with the regional organised crime unit network.

Co-ordination and support of operational activity

Effective co-ordination between the NCA and ROCUs on joint operations is important.

In the case studies we examined, where such joint working took place, it was generally effective with positive outcomes. We would encourage more joint operational working to improve efficiency, build greater co-operation, and reduce serious and organised crime.

These case studies illustrate examples of excellent joint working between the NCA and the ROCU network.

Case study: Operation Erbium

Operation Erbium is a good example of the Yorkshire and Humber ROCU and the NCA working together to reduce serious and organised crime. Surveillance assets from each agency were used to increase operational coverage, with defined roles and responsibilities for each agency.

Six firearms (including a sub-machine gun), ammunition and a quantity of suspected class A drugs were seized.

Case study: Operation Key

The Eastern ROCU (ERSOU) requested NCA support for its modern slavery investigation. People were being ferried from Belgium to Kent using rigid-hulled inflatable boats. The NCA organised the National Maritime Information Centre and the NCA Magma team to provide experience and support, including a Bronze Commander to support the international aspects of the investigation. The agency also supplied air support and telecoms analysis.

Training and secondments

ROCUs provide excellent training and development opportunities for the NCA. We visited co-located offices where newly recruited NCA officers could work on operational investigations within the ROCU to achieve [professionalising investigations programme](#) (PIP) accreditation.

In one NCA branch office, 34 NCA officers had been seconded to the ROCU and a constituent force to develop their investigative skills. This had benefited both the NCA

and the ROCU with some close working relationships developing. We were surprised that further training was not co-ordinated between the two organisations. This would potentially create efficiencies and enhance working relationships while sharing knowledge and experience. We would urge the NCA and ROCU network to explore this.

We found no examples where ROCU staff were locally seconded to the NCA. This would strengthen operational relationships. Seconded officers could learn how the NCA operates, making closer working possible. This is a missed opportunity.

Recruitment

In previous inspections, we have found evidence of NCA recruitment campaigns that have been poorly co-ordinated with ROCUs. In one region, this led to almost an entire team of recently recruited cyber-crime investigators leaving a ROCU to join the National Cyber Crime Unit. The ROCU had to rebuild its cyber capability virtually from scratch. This might serve the needs of one organisation to the detriment of the other. It does not serve the public, help reduce organised crime or demonstrate an approach whereby everyone works together to tackle serious and organised crime.

Specialist skills are in short supply. The NCA and the ROCUs are recruiting from the same pool. There are, for example, too few trained investigators, leading to the current national recruitment campaigns for detectives. Co-ordination is needed around recruiting for some specialist skills in establishing roles, job descriptions, and terms and conditions, and in running campaigns. This could lead to greater efficiency in recruitment and retention, as well as improving the quality of applicants and the sharing of suitable candidates to support the needs of the NCA and the ROCUs. We do not underestimate the potential complexity of this task. However, without such co-operation and innovation, recruitment difficulties are likely to persist.

These problems affect all ROCUs, which have both police officers and police staff on secondment from their constituent forces. Geography can mean that force personnel are reluctant to commit to a long commute to join a regional unit. ROCUs are reluctant to guarantee medium- or long-term job security for police staff because the annual funding cycle makes it more difficult to predict whether these posts will be retained.

The NCA and the ROCU network should co-ordinate the efficient recruitment and training of specialist staff to ensure that both the agency and the units have the essential specialist skills needed to tackle serious and organised crime effectively.

Funding

How the NCA and ROCUs are funded affects how they operate together. The NCA, funded nationally by central government, operates to a set of national priorities. The ROCUs, primarily funded locally, are inevitably influenced by more local concerns. This difference can affect how the organisations work together. It can be particularly acute when NCA and ROCU priorities diverge significantly. In one region, local pressure influenced operational activity associated with relatively low-level organised crime. This did not reach the seriousness to justify NCA support, although such help was sought. It also distracted the ROCU from engaging in more serious criminal investigation.

ROCU funding also affects the retention of ROCU staff as well as the setting of a unit's own priorities and its meeting of operational objectives.

Funding and procurement arrangements for ROCUs are complex. Most of the funding comes from PCCs and the constituent forces with governance and accountability to meet local priorities. Other funding comes from various sources, including from central government, which has its own priorities, governance and accountability. ROCUs often find themselves trying to respond to competing local and national priorities to retain the funding streams that allow them to operate.

ROCU personnel told us that the current funding model makes it difficult for them to plan longer term. The Home Office grant for ROCUs is an annual settlement and additional funding is usually for short periods for a particular purpose or function. The absence of long-term funding limits the plans that ROCUs can make to work with the NCA beyond each financial year. It also limits the long-term planning within the ROCU network. The way ROCUs are funded, including the complexity, sources of funding and short-termism, needs to be addressed if the NCA and ROCUs are to better align current competing priorities and better coordinate activity.

Heads of ROCU and NCA branch commanders believe that the annual funding settlement creates uncertainty and inhibits essential long-term projects including estate planning, recruitment and retention of staff, and information technology development. Planning with the NCA can be affected in areas such as co-location, interoperability or prioritisation of threat. In order to tackle serious and organised crime effectively, and to create a whole-system approach, there is a clear need for ROCUs to anticipate future threats and continually develop innovative capabilities that are aligned to those of the NCA, police forces and partner organisations. The Home Office should support this by assessing the benefits and viability of a longer-term funding settlement for ROCUs. Greater certainty would help ROCUs to plan more effectively for the longer term. We commented on the funding arrangements for the ROCUs in our previous inspection in 2016.

Recommendation 5

By 1 March 2021, the Home Office should conduct a review of the funding arrangements for regional organised crime units (ROCUs) that would reduce barriers to better integrated working between the National Crime Agency and the ROCU network.

Specialist capabilities and support provided by the NCA

The NCA has a broad range of specialist capabilities, which for practical reasons need to be held at a national level. These can be made available to other law enforcement organisations, including to ROCUs. It is important that the ROCUs make effective use of these specialist support capabilities to fight serious and organised crime at a regional level.

Strategic direction

The NCA provides strategic direction in tackling serious and organised crime to other law enforcement organisations, including ROCUs.

The agency produces and shares the NSA. This document offers a single picture of the threat to the UK from serious and organised crime. It drives activity to fight serious and organised crime in the NCA and to a lesser degree in ROCUs. Staff from both the NCA and the ROCU network cited the NSA as the source document that frequently informed decisions and the tasking of resources. We were pleased to see this document having a direct influence on operational activity.

But we identified an ongoing tension between the national priorities of the NCA, as detailed in the NSA, and those priorities of some ROCUs that were driven by more local threats. The [Strategic Policing Requirement](#) defines the national threats to the UK and the NSA prioritises those serious and organised crime threats. Combined, these documents should determine the law enforcement response for the whole serious and organised crime network. For the system to operate more effectively and efficiently, this tension between local and national needs to be resolved. Greater clarity should be provided in the *Strategic Policing Requirement* as to what is expected of chief constables and PCCs.

Recommendation 6

By 31 December 2020, the Home Office, as part of its review of the *Strategic Policing Requirement*, should consider how greater emphasis is placed on national threats such as serious and organised crime by police and crime commissioners and chief constables.

Staff in the NCA acknowledged the importance of the NSA and confirmed it was fundamental to decisions surrounding the deployment of resources against serious and organised crime. Those we interviewed within the ROCU network said that the

NSA accurately reflected the issues they faced in their region. In previous inspections, we have commented on the importance of the accuracy of the NSA if it is to inform operational activity effectively.

Investigation and intelligence capability

Investigating serious and organised crime requires high-quality specialist capabilities. These include sensitive intelligence collection and investigation techniques not generally held within ROCUs or police forces. The NCA provides specialist capabilities that are best delivered nationally on behalf of all UK law enforcement agencies. This is often the best-value and most efficient model, with specialist capabilities available to ROCUs and local police forces as demand requires. These capabilities include the following:

- sensitive technical [intelligence collection](#);
- an [international network](#);
- [fugitives and international crime](#);
- [major crime investigative support](#);
- [serious crime analysis](#);
- [missing persons](#);
- [counterfeit currency](#);
- [civil recovery and tax](#); and
- [protected persons](#).

Interviews with operational ROCU staff showed that the capabilities of the NCA were not always well known or fully understood. This is particularly the case where the tactics are niche and accessed using the NCA but supplied by other national government intelligence agencies. ROCU officers were sometimes unsure how to access them, or in some cases what the tactic could achieve. This had the potential to create missed opportunities for tackling serious and organised crime groups.

Sensitive intelligence-gathering techniques are only available for certain types of investigations and operations. We accept that some of the more sensitive investigative techniques should not be widely circulated among ROCU network staff. This is an area where the ROCCs should assist. They should be aware of the extent of the NCA's capabilities and be able to advise the ROCU network when a tactic exists, and how to access it and apply it to specific investigations.

The NCA's ability to prioritise threat and work with ROCUs

The NCA leads national tasking, co-ordination and governance of the response to serious and organised crime, but it is wholly reliant on the co-operation of the police and other law enforcement bodies.

The [Crime and Courts Act 2013](#) includes specific provisions for the NCA to collect information from these other public bodies and, in certain circumstances, for the NCA to direct their activities.

In previous reports, we identified problems with ROCUs attempting to escalate to the NCA operations involving high-risk organised crime groups. Despite a clearly defined process, interviews with ROCU staff showed that confusion remains about how this can be achieved. Our fieldwork did not identify any operation that had been successfully raised from the ROCUs to the NCA. Many within the ROCUs were unsure of the process to achieve this, possibly due to the lack of awareness of the roles and responsibilities documents. Some work may be escalated to the NCA, but there is concern that the lack of resources is an impediment to achieving this.

The network of police forces, law enforcement and the NCA needs to be able to respond more effectively to increasing levels of serious and organised crime. The 2018 *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy* emphasises the need for law enforcement to work together as a whole-system approach. Tackling the breadth of serious and organised crime is beyond the capacity and capabilities of any one organisation. The NCA has responsibility for co-ordination of the response to tackling serious and organised crime. It needs both the full picture of the threat and the ability to direct resources, such as the ROCUs, to mitigate that threat. The agency's serious and organised crime system tasking project, a multi-agency design team, is implementing a plan designed to deliver a single, effective approach to tasking across the network of organisations tackling serious and organised crime. It will focus on a whole-system response to the highest priorities, and on enhancing access to, and use of, specialist capabilities by the ROCUs and other partners.

The project includes work on governance and prioritisation. Currently, the NCA and the ROCUs have different ways to define and manage threats, and to decide on priorities. Under the new system, the agency's method of prioritising will identify the highest threats to the public and the UK. The ROCUs should migrate to the same system. Bringing the way the two bodies assess risks closer together will improve prioritisation, tasking and co-ordination of resources.

Recommendation 7

By 1 December 2020, the National Crime Agency and the regional organised crime unit network should agree to the use of the NCA method of defining threat and prioritisation.

This process will allow for:

- richer, timely assessment of threat, harm and risk, which reflects collective understanding across the serious and organised crime system and drives strategic and tactical decision making;
- a consistent process for identifying, assessing and prioritising threat, harm and risk across all demand on the serious and organised crime system; and
- collaborative management of operational risk across the system, with clear ownership and the transfer of risk to the best placed agency to lead.¹⁰

The ROCCs should play an important part in this new process. This will require a repositioning of the role profile and some investment by the NCA.

The serious and organised crime system tasking project is another example of the significant change that the NCA is undergoing. It is too early for us to comment on the effectiveness of this project. We look forward to gauging progress during future inspections.

Fundamental change is needed in how serious and organised crime is co-ordinated for ROCUs to adopt this new method of defining threat and prioritising operational activity, in line with the NCA approach. This may require greater control by a 'serious and organised crime co-ordinator' rather than the current influence of PCCs and chief officers. Co-ordination of counter-terrorism offers a good template. We would encourage the NCA and senior police leaders to consider what good practice exists within the national CT structure.

Interoperability

During this inspection, we examined how easy it was for NCA officers to work with their ROCU colleagues. We considered how much interoperability existed between the two organisations at a tactical and operational level.

Interoperability is not simply working together effectively. Rather, it is the process that allows:

- unrestricted sharing of human resources;
- sharing of intelligence and technical capabilities, alongside effective communication; and
- co-ordination with a joint understanding of risk between the NCA and the ROCUs.

We found some evidence of effective interoperability. ROCUs were very complimentary about some of the highly specialist functions that the NCA provides.

¹⁰ NCA SOC system tasking project, NCA, 2019.

These include the provision of lawful interception, the anti-kidnap and extortion unit, and serious crime analysis. Deconfliction processes exist locally between the agency and the ROCU, particularly when there is a co-located sensitive intelligence unit. We found local joint meetings and tasking processes that were effective, particularly when there were joint resources involved.

However, the evidence suggested that the joint working between the NCA and the ROCUs was personality based and neither systematic nor underpinned by clear interoperability. This is not sustainable because it relies on relationships rather than organisational processes and protocols. The agency should consider introducing joint training and joint technical training, and enhancing interoperability around information technology.

The picture was patchy. In some regions, the NCA and ROCU could not communicate using Airwave or jointly track assets. Elsewhere, these issues had been resolved.

The NCA should work with the ROCU network to achieve consistent interoperability whenever possible.

Accountability

The ROCUs are accountable to local [chief officers](#) and PCCs. The NCA is held to account by the Home Office. It is not responsible or answerable, at a local level, to forces or the ROCUs. We found isolated incidents where local chief officers had questioned the contribution that the NCA had made to a specific local problem.

The NCA and the ROCUs use disruptions to monitor success. The disruptions are recorded on the NCA's APMIS system. Some concerns were raised that the assessment of success was too directed on disruption, and therefore enforcement activity, without any wider performance measures to judge how effective the organisations were at tackling serious and organised crime. There are no measures to help assess how well the NCA works with the ROCU network.

We found very few examples where investigations were transferred from ROCUs up to the NCA for it to lead. Generally, investigations were passed down by the NCA to ROCUs, which found this frustrating. We were presented with several operations that were a national rather than a local threat but remained with ROCUs rather than being escalated to the agency.

We have commented previously that, if ROCU resources were consistently directed towards the most serious threats, more ROCU activity would occur in major towns and cities. This could lead to some police force areas, with smaller towns, feeling that they were receiving less regional support; despite their financial contribution to ROCU capabilities. Given the cross-border nature of crime – for example, in our [county lines report](#), this perception may not be correct. The NCA, together with ROCUs, may wish to make sure that this is clearly communicated to, and understood by, interested parties.

Integration and co-location

Co-location is when the NCA branch office and the ROCU occupy the same building.

Integration involves an element of co-ordination and co-operation. Good integration leads to seamless connectivity, transfer of information and intelligence, and joint tasking.

We have commented in previous inspection reports on the importance of co-location and closer integration, and highlight it again now, particularly co-location of the intelligence function. Co-located sensitive intelligence units contribute to the effective flow of intelligence between the NCA and ROCUs. This was evident during and outside normal business hours. Effective intelligence sharing is important to ensure that policing activity is well co-ordinated, and that priorities and assessments are agreed. This occurs when you have full integration.

We visited several premises where NCA and ROCU resources were on the same site, but with little evidence of interoperability or integration. In one location, the ROCU staff incorrectly believed that an office used by NCA staff was a training unit – an example of little integration. Co-location is only effective when it is reinforced by better connectivity, local tasking, and better sharing of information and intelligence.

Elsewhere, we found that the co-location was accidental. In this case, cleaners told ROCU staff that the NCA intended to vacate the building. The ROCU management was not formally informed of this intention. The co-location did not take place for operational reasons. There was little joint operational activity demonstrated during our visit. The NCA and the ROCU did not share resources. The NCA staff spent much of their time on operations in London while the ROCU staff were deployed locally.

Integration of operating practices and strong relationships between personnel can be achieved without full co-location but it is harder to achieve without good leadership and effective local tasking. In the small number of instances where there is full co-location and interoperability, teams work together more effectively. Full co-location is where the agencies involved not only share accommodation – with no walls or locked doors – but also share resources and conduct joint operations, training and tasking. The North East crime campus offers a good example of a designed collaborative and co-located facility. There is an effective joint tasking process and the NCA and ROCU work side by side on the same floor and share resources. In this case, we found co-location and full integration. We see this as an example of good practice.

Conclusion

Serious and organised crime poses a threat to the public across the UK and beyond. Its impact can be felt by individuals, communities and businesses. Tackling serious and organised crime effectively requires the most advanced capabilities within police forces, other law enforcement agencies and wider partner organisations. Increasingly, serious and organised crime is perpetrated online and has an international dimension. It demands a carefully planned and nationally co-ordinated whole-system response by the NCA, ROCUs, police forces and wider partner organisations.

The NCA is a national law enforcement organisation, operating in a complex environment across regional, national and international boundaries. Its relationship with other law enforcement bodies, such as ROCUs, can be complicated. This arises from, among other factors, gaps in legislation that could otherwise provide clarity, competing priorities at a local and national level, and the absence of an approach whereby everyone pulls together to tackle serious and organised crime.

The NCA is involved in a transformation programme to improve how it operates and how it engages with ROCUs and other organisations. However, constant change can make the core role of leading, supporting and co-ordinating the fight against serious and organised crime more difficult, both for the agency and others such as ROCUs. Stronger communication, engagement and relationships are crucial, such as clarity around the role of ROCCs, but so too are having the right systems and processes in place to make sure that everyone works together for a common aim.

The relationship with ROCUs is generally good. The value of ROCUs is evident, and they must continue to play a substantial, long-term role in tackling serious and organised crime. The NCA recognises the importance ROCUs play in helping support the response to reducing the effects of serious and organised crime, and to protecting the public. ROCUs appreciate their role as the link between the NCA and local police forces. But the role of the ROCU in working closely with the NCA in an integrated way is far less clear. There is an opportunity for more effective and systematic working between the two. This could be achieved through closer tasking and co-ordination, particularly at a local level, and aligning the processes for prioritising threat more closely. Co-location, integration and interoperability are all opportunities that should be explored and, whenever possible, exploited.

The way in which law enforcement agencies respond to serious and organised crime is less systematic than, say, the network that keeps people safe from terrorism. The 2018 *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy* sought to address this. The NCA and ROCU network working together, along with police forces and other bodies, are vital to making this strategy a success. The better the agency and ROCU network can

work together, the greater will be the success. This will require not just the determination of leaders but changes to legislation, doctrine and funding. This needs political support both locally and nationally.

At an operational level, there was confidence in the NCA's ability to provide a range of specialist services to ROCUs, which were of a high standard and valued. There may be more to be done to make sure that the full range of specialist capabilities are understood across the ROCU network.

We were encouraged to find good examples of the NCA and ROCUs working effectively together. We urge the agency to build on this good platform. There was limited evidence of the NCA leading on work passed to them from ROCUs and police forces. This was despite some evidence of investigations with a high level of threat and national implications. The defining of threat and agreeing priorities could be improved between the NCA and ROCUs, and gaining agreement on one process could be a positive step forward.

We have made seven recommendations that will support the NCA in strengthening its relationship with ROCUs, and improve their joint effectiveness in tackling serious and organised crime.

Annex A: Terms of reference

Our terms of reference were to consider:

How well does the NCA work with the regional organised crime unit (ROCU) network to reduce the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK and our communities?

We specifically considered the following questions in the relationship between the NCA and the ROCUs:

- How effective are collaboration arrangements between the NCA and ROCUs?
- How effective are the NCA's regional organised crime co-ordinators (ROCCs) at developing and maintaining the relationship between the NCA and ROCUs?
- How does the NCA's relationship with the ROCU support its role to lead, task, co-ordinate and support operational activity at local, regional, national and international levels?
- What support does the NCA provide to the ROCUs and is it effective and consistent across the network? What specialist capabilities does the NCA make available to ROCUs and how easy is it to access these?
- How effective is the NCA at prioritising threat from the highest risk serious and organised criminals and engaging with ROCUs to target these through effective use of the capabilities for each agency?
- To what extent is the NCA integrated and/or co-located with the ROCUs to support their 'relentless disruption of serious and organised crime'?

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