

National Crime Agency calls for further investment in new assessment report

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The National Crime Agency's (NCA) Director General Lynne Owens has said that a £2.7bn investment in law enforcement will be required to combat serious and organised crime (SOC) over the next three years. This call for funding was expressed by Owens in the 2019 National Strategic Assessment (NSA)—the sixth of its kind. She conservatively estimates that there are at least 181,000 people linked to SOC currently residing in the UK. Both Siobhain Egan, director at Lewis Nedas and Alun Milford, partner at Kingsley Napley, agree that Owens' call for further investment should not be ignored by the government, given the increased size, complexity and reach of SOC in recent years. Egan underlines that budgetary cuts have forced the NCA to concentrate on specific areas of expertise at the expense of others. Milford, in contrast, emphasises that the increasingly international nature of SOC requires greater co-operation between countries—something that may be threatened by a no deal Brexit.

In the NSA, Owens states that SOC in the UK 'kills more people every year than terrorism, war, and natural disasters combined' and has a greater impact on UK citizens 'than any other national security threat', costing the UK at least £37bn a year.

Owens states that without significant further investment, 'the whole of UK law enforcement, and therefore the public, will feel the consequences'.

The recent 'explosion' of SOC

Speaking on Owens' call for further investment, Egan notes a lack of funding for the NCA, despite the considerable increase in SOC in recent years: 'The NCA has been correctly raising the issue of their budgetary limitations for the last 12 months or so. It has a huge remit and is dealing with a massive explosion in the growth of various organised crime groups and cybercrime, over the last 10–11 years. There is a clear correlation between the government's austerity drive and the draconian cuts to the budgets of all the law enforcement agencies, and the acute rise in organised crime, which effects all of us.'

She goes on to explain that this has led the NCA to concentrate on specific cases at the expense of others: 'We regularly defend NCA investigations and prosecutions throughout the country, the evidential quality of which has improved enormously, but the volume has been markedly reduced, especially when compared with that of its various predecessors, which did not have to suffer such cuts. Fraud investigations, for example, have largely been ignored by the NCA and all the other law enforcement agencies and it is a massive issue for the public and financial institutions alike.'

SOC increasingly 'international in nature'

Milford believes that SOC is developing beyond the ability of law enforcement to cope within existing budgets and that we are now at a tipping point. He agrees with Owens' assessment of the situation and warns ministers against ignoring her advice: 'Owens...is right about the way organised crime is both increasing in complexity and

reach...[and] that the law enforcement community needs proper funding to be able to respond. Her speech should be required reading for ministers—to allow her plea to fall on deaf ears would be to make the worst of false economies.’

However, Milford also highlights that the problem of SOC goes beyond UK funding problems and into the international realm. He says ‘much of the serious and organised crime described in the strategic assessment is international in nature and in her speech, Owens pays tribute to the international partnerships UK law enforcement has forged as a means of combatting the threat to us.’ Milford notes that alternatives to the current arrangements ‘can only be harmed by a no-deal Brexit, which will result in the UK having to quit the EU’s law enforcement structures and information-sharing mechanisms’ and ‘be an additional cost for UK law enforcement and prosecutors.’

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