

National Crime Agency inspection

An inspection of the National Crime Agency's specialist operations centre, crime operational support and serious crime analysis section

November 2017

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1. Summary

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)¹ has a statutory duty to carry out inspections of the National Crime Agency (NCA), and following an inspection we must report to the Home Secretary on the efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency.

This is our third inspection of the NCA. For this inspection, we looked at the support provided to law enforcement in respect of serious crime investigations. The terms of reference were to determine:

- How effective are the services provided by the serious crime analysis section, crime operational support and the specialist operations centre?
- How efficiently are these services provided?

We conducted our inspection between June and August 2016 when we spoke with officers within the NCA and consulted police forces, law enforcement and criminal justice organisations. Also, we analysed various data and reviewed documents related to this aspect of NCA operations.

This is a generally positive report. We were impressed with the dedication and commitment of officers across all three teams; they provide support that is held in high regard by the police service. The leadership team has been instrumental in ensuring there is engagement with law enforcement and other interested parties to help improve the services provided. Where we have been critical, the fault often lies outside the NCA or with precursor organisations.

We examined the functions within the specialist operations centre and found that there is strong demand for most services provided. We established that a shortage of registered witness intermediaries is restricting the ability of the NCA to meet requests for support. The team is working well to meet the majority of requests to help vulnerable witnesses, but recruitment rests with the Ministry of Justice and needs to be addressed urgently. Until there are sufficient numbers, a better system to prioritise requests is needed.

We became aware of backlogs of current case requests and historic cases awaiting upload to the national injuries database. We expect the focus to remain on tackling the backlog of case requests for live investigations, while efforts are made to deal

¹ This inspection was carried out before 19 July 2017, when HMIC also took on responsibility for fire & rescue service inspections and was renamed HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. The methodology underpinning our inspection findings is unaffected by this change. References to HMICFRS in this report may relate to an event that happened before 19 July 2017 when HMICFRS was HMIC. Citations of documents which HMIC published before 19 July 2017 will still cite HMIC as the publisher.

with historic cases. We have also highlighted that the team supporting the Operation Marshall database² needs greater resilience.

We examined the services provided by crime operational support and the specialist operations centre. To ensure that these teams meet the current and future needs of serious crime investigations, we have asked for greater consultation between the NCA and the police service to inform what specialist services are needed.

The inspection of the serious crime analysis section presented two main issues. We established that the statutory codes of practice (which set standards for the submission of cases to this team) had yet to be laid before Parliament, and we have recommended that this is done. Of greater concern were backlogs within police forces of cases awaiting submission to the NCA, and of cases held in the serious crime analysis section awaiting input and analysis. We have sought action from the NCA (and the police service) to ensure that this important function can operate as efficiently and effectively as possible, and to maximise the opportunity to provide investigative links to the most serious of crimes.

We also examined themes that were common to all three teams. We found that the purpose of each team within the NCA was absolutely clear, and that officers understood their role. We also identified some areas where action will help improve management oversight: recording of decision making; visibility of relevant performance data to managers; getting a better understanding of demand; and the streamlining of various feedback processes.

We established, in the main, that NCA officers had access to the information they needed to support their roles, clearly understood the importance of information security, and were able to pass relevant information to police forces, when required, in a timely fashion.

There were good examples of training and development for officers, but we sought greater consistency across all teams. Recruitment and retention poses various problems, but efforts are being made by the NCA to address them. We recognise fully the efforts made by the teams to publicise the services offered, and how to use them, but we would like to see more done in conjunction with the police service to improve understanding.

Some of our more significant concerns relate to areas inherited from precursor agencies. The NCA cannot tackle these concerns alone: the police service, and interested parties within the criminal justice system, also have a responsibility in some of the areas where we seek improvement.

² Database of intrafamilial child homicides and suspicious child deaths maintained by the national injuries database team.

We therefore conclude that the three teams provide an effective and efficient service; but that in order to meet the needs of present-day policing there must be a concerted effort to respond to the recommendations and areas for improvement set out in this report.

We have made eight recommendations and identified four areas for improvement.

Recommendations

- By 30 November 2017, the Ministry of Justice, in conjunction with the Crown Prosecution Service, should determine whether funding can be made available to recruit and train more registered witness intermediaries.
- By 31 July 2017, the NCA, in consultation with the Ministry of Justice, National Police Chiefs' Council and the Crown Prosecution Service, should determine a more effective approach to prioritising requests for registered witness intermediaries, until there are sufficient numbers to meet demand.
- By 31 March 2018, the NCA should have reviewed the backlog of cases not yet included in the database, processed those considered relevant and disposed of the remainder.
- By 30 September 2017, the NCA, in conjunction with the National Police Chiefs' Council, should have evaluated, agreed and implemented arrangements that will ensure that the service provided by Operation Marshall has the stability required.
- By 31 December 2017, the NCA should have undertaken a detailed consultation with the police service in respect of the range of services provided by the crime operational support team and specialist operations centre, to determine which services need to be maintained and what will be required to support policing in the future.
- By 30 November 2017, the Home Office, in consultation with the NCA, should ensure that the revised statutory codes of practice setting standards for the submission of cases to the serious crime analysis team are laid before Parliament.
- By 31 December 2017, the Director General of the NCA, in consultation with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for Crime Operations, should devise and implement a plan to: remove the backlog of cases held by forces that have not been submitted to the NCA; secure compliance with the codes of practice; deal with the backlog of cases held by the NCA awaiting input and analysis; and ensure that the prioritisation and triage approach is jointly agreed and is as effective as possible.
- By 31 July 2017, the NCA should have a plan in place for training and the continual professional development of all officers across the three teams.

Areas for improvement

- By 31 May 2017, there should be consistent and auditable recording of decisions at all management meetings for the three teams inspected.
- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should ensure that, to help improve efficiency, relevant performance data for the three teams are visible to managers.
- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should have completed work to provide a better understanding of demand across the three teams.
- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should improve the efficiency of the feedback collection processes across the three teams, by reducing the number of discrete processes from five to one.

2. Introduction

Our commission

HMICFRS is an independent inspectorate which is required³ to carry out inspections of the National Crime Agency (also referred to as “the NCA” or “the Agency”). Following an inspection, we must report to the Home Secretary on the efficiency and effectiveness of the NCA.⁴

This inspection was carried out as part of our inspection programme for 2016–17⁵ which was drawn up after public consultation and approved by the Home Secretary.

This is our third inspection of the NCA. We looked at the capability and capacity of three related teams: the specialist operations centre; crime operational support; and the serious crime analysis section.

Background and context

The evolution of the capability provided by these teams can be traced back to a 1981 HMIC report⁶ which examined the police investigation into the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ case – multiple murders and serious sexual offences in various police areas committed by one offender. HMIC’s report included several recommendations: the standardisation of serious crime investigations; the computerisation of records to improve efficiency and to enable intelligence to be shared; the development of greater expertise in the management of serious crimes; and the availability of specialist advice for senior investigating officers.

In the aftermath of the Yorkshire Ripper case, and following HMIC’s recommendations, the police service developed new capabilities. Forces have created their own computerised intelligence systems, some of which are now connected with those in neighbouring forces and others within their region. There is also the Police National Database (PND), which is designed to enable automated intelligence sharing across all police forces and other law enforcement agencies.

³ Crime and Courts Act 2013, section 11(1).

⁴ Crime and Courts Act 2013, section 11(3).

⁵ *HMIC inspection programme 2016/17*, March 2016, HMIC. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/hmic-inspection-programme-2016-17/

⁶ *The Yorkshire Ripper Case, review of the police investigation of the case*, Lawrence Byford ,Esq., CBE., QPM., HMIC, London, December 1981. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/sir-lawrence-byford-report-into-the-police-handling-of-the-yorkshire-ripper-case

While there has been much progress in linking intelligence across law enforcement, we acknowledge that some of the additional information required for national intelligence analysis of homicide and serious sexual offences is not routinely recorded within intelligence systems. The police supply this information, such as detailed victim statements and medical evidence, for the serious crime analysis section of the NCA to analyse on their behalf.

The arrangements for specialist advice and support have also evolved since the 1981 HMIC report. Some forces will not experience certain serious crimes very often, and expertise may be limited. These forces rely on specialist advice and support that can be provided by crime operational support and the specialist operations centre.

The capabilities provided by the three teams were developed by the National Crime Faculty⁷ within National Police Training⁸. This became part of Centrex⁹ in 2002 and of the National Policing Improvement Agency¹⁰ in 2007.

In July 2010 a decision was taken to create the NCA. In March 2012, the Home Secretary announced that, as part of the preparations for the NCA's creation, the responsibility for providing certain 'critical functions' (including those now provided by the teams we inspected) would be adopted by the Serious Organised Crime Agency¹¹ as an interim position until the NCA became operational.¹² These critical functions became part of the NCA at its inception in October 2013.

⁷ A function created in 1995 under National Police Training to support serious crime investigations.

⁸ The body charged with developing and delivering police training in England and Wales which was succeeded by Centrex.

⁹ Formally known as the Central Police Training and Development Authority, it was established by the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, and was the primary means of police training in England and Wales.

¹⁰ A non-departmental public body in the United Kingdom established by the Police and Justice Act 2006 to support police by providing expertise in such areas as information technology, information sharing, and recruitment.

¹¹ A non-departmental public body in the United Kingdom established by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 to function as a national law enforcement agency.

¹² House of Commons debate 26 March 2012, c95WS. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2012-03-26/debates/120326100029/NationalPolicingImprovementAgency#contribution-1203261000119>

Our terms of reference

In drawing up the terms of reference for our inspection, we consulted the NCA Director General and the Director General of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism.¹³

Our terms of reference were as follows:

- How effective are the services provided by the serious crime analysis section, crime operational support and the specialist operations centre?
- How efficiently are these services provided?

This inspection report examines the services provided by each of the three teams named in our terms of reference, and then considers themes that are relevant to all three.

Methodology

The full details of the methodology are set out in Annex A.

In summary, we conducted our inspection between June and August 2016 and spoke to approximately 60 officers within the NCA. We consulted police forces, as the main recipients of the services provided, and other law enforcement and criminal justice organisations. We collected and analysed relevant data and we reviewed a series of documents related to this aspect of NCA operations.

¹³ The Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism within the Home Office works to counter the threats from terrorism and serious and organised crime. Its work is covered in the Government's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST and in the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy.

3. Specialist operations centre

The specialist operations centre provides a single point of contact for police forces and law enforcement agencies. Its services are not wholly restricted to serious crime investigation, as it also provides support on other crime types where capacity allows. The specialist operations centre consists of four teams.

- The crime team provides advice, investigative suggestions and, where required, access to the resources of the crime operational support team. The crime team also has communications data advisers¹⁴ providing support to investigations.
- The specialist research team uses knowledge of investigative policies, good practice, guidance and legislation, to assist forces.
- The witness intermediary team receives requests from police officers and prosecutors for support to vulnerable victims and witnesses (often young children, disabled people or those with learning difficulties). On behalf of the Ministry of Justice, the team operates a 'matching service' by placing requestors in contact with registered intermediaries¹⁵ who are there to assist communication with a vulnerable witness during criminal proceedings. This team is managed by the NCA's national vulnerable witness adviser, who advises on some of the issues that investigators need to take into consideration before and during interviews with vulnerable people.
- The national injuries database team supports serious crime investigations with the analysis of weapons and wounds, and is available to the police and to forensic practitioners.

Findings

The majority of services provided by the specialist operations centre are in heavy demand, although this demand varies from force to force. While we recognise the consistent high levels of matching achieved by the witness intermediary team, we have recommended that there is an increase in the number of intermediaries to improve the support provided to forces, and a more effective approach to prioritising requests is determined until there are sufficient numbers.

¹⁴ These advisers provide advice as to how communications data (data lawfully obtained with regard to phone and internet use) may be best used in support of investigations.

¹⁵ *The Registered Intermediary Procedural Guidance Manual*, Ministry of Justice, December 2015, page 8. Available at: www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/RI_ProceduralGuidanceManual_2015.pdf

The national injuries database has a significant backlog of work. We expect the focus to remain on supporting live investigations as a priority, while efforts are made to tackle these backlogs. We have also highlighted that the service provided by the team supporting the Operation Marshall database needs more resilient staffing arrangements, and have made a recommendation to address this.

The crime team and the specialist research team

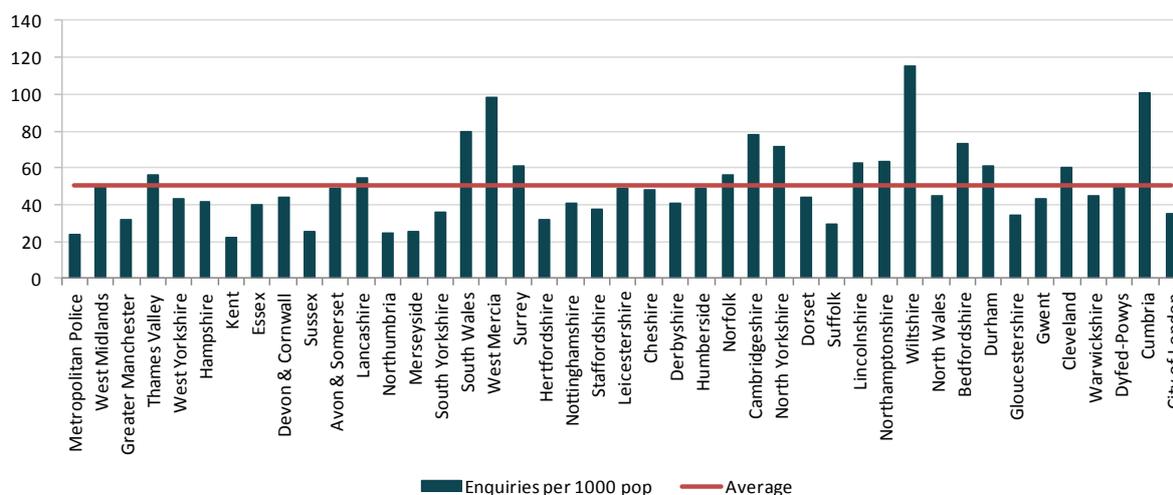
We deal with these teams together because they are closely aligned and form the main focal point for accessing the services within the specialist operation centre and crime operational support. We examined data¹⁶ relating to access to these services and the requests for assistance.

Between April 2012 and March 2016 there were over 3,000 crime operations enquiries received each year. These varied in nature from seeking the deployment of a specialist adviser to a murder scene to telephone advice in less serious cases. Police forces from across the United Kingdom made approximately 90 per cent of the enquiries, with the NCA (and before October 2013, its precursor, the Serious Organised Crime Agency) representing the largest proportion of the remaining enquiries by other law enforcement agencies. The figures demonstrate a high demand for the service provided.

We found a rough correlation between force size and the number of enquiries made, but with some notable exceptions. Force level data on the number of crime operations enquiries per 1,000 population (shown in Figure 1 below) suggests that some large forces, including the Metropolitan Police, Greater Manchester Police and Merseyside Police make far fewer enquiries than the England and Wales average. This may be due to greater in-force capabilities to manage crime. Conversely, some smaller forces make a greater number of enquiries than the England and Wales average. For example, the numbers of enquiries made by Wiltshire, Cumbria and Bedfordshire greatly exceed this average. This may be due to greater awareness of the services provided. We discuss publicity for services in the penultimate chapter.

¹⁶ Data supplied by NCA on 23 August 2016.

Figure 1: Number of crime operations enquiries made by force per 1,000 population 2015/16



Source: Data supplied by NCA on 23 August 2016

Note: Forces are displayed in order of decreasing annual gross revenue expenditure

The specialist research team’s role is to ensure that all enquiries for service received are appropriately recorded within a bespoke case-management system. We established that the crime team, as well as responding to enquiries, scans the media with a view to identifying relevant cases that may benefit from its assistance. The crime team were short of advisers at the time of our inspection and the communication advisers were providing assistance.

The communication data advisers within the crime team are experiencing an increased demand for advice and strategies for dealing with technology. As an example, during an interview with one police force we were told that local and regional communications data advisers had assessed that nothing could be done to recover data from a device seized by police in a murder investigation; the NCA communications data advisers, however, had identified a specialist for the force to approach and this had resulted in the successful recovery of data from the seized device.

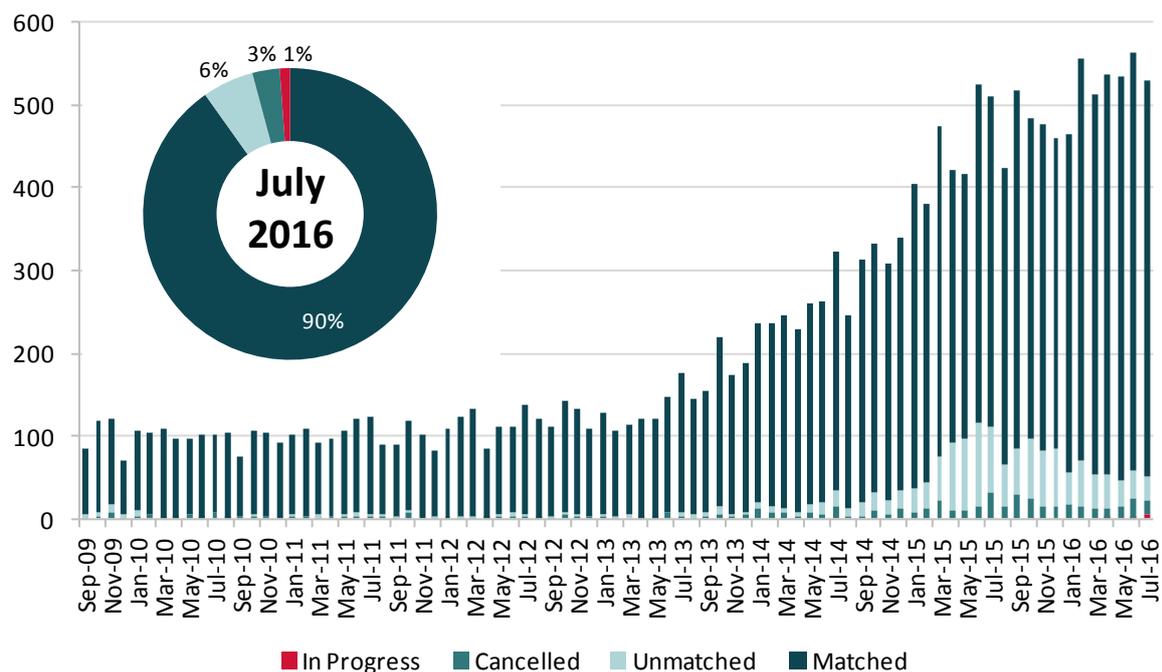
Witness intermediary team

We examined data¹⁷ from 2009, when the witness intermediary team took responsibility for the matching service. Up to 2013, demand was relatively stable, but since then there has been a fivefold increase.¹⁸ The diagram below (Figure 2) illustrates the cases matched, unmatched, cancelled (where an initial request is withdrawn or not continued) and those in progress.

¹⁷ Data supplied by the NCA on 19 December 2016.

¹⁸ We did not explore in detail the underlying reasons for the increased demand. Demand began to increase in 2013, and therefore we consider it may be due to victims feeling more confident to report crimes following the Jimmy Savile sexual abuse scandal, news of which was first televised in October 2012.

Figure 2: Witness intermediary matching figures 2009-16 (embedded chart shows position as of July 2016)



Source: Data supplied by the NCA on 19 December 2016

This figure shows that, after a period in 2015 when 20 percent of cases went unmatched, that figure had fallen to 6 percent in mid 2016. Given the enormous increase in demand, this is to the credit of everyone involved. Although the number of unmatched cases has decreased substantially since 2015, it is still higher than the number in preceding years.

We examined the levels of NCA staffing for dealing with the demand to match intermediaries with victims and witnesses. In 2009, two posts were funded by the Ministry of Justice to deal with a projected 200 cases a month and this was increased by one in the 2015/16 financial year to deal with the rise in requests. There are now approximately 500 cases each month and the NCA, at time of our inspection, had requested funding for another post from the Ministry of Justice.

Even with an increase in NCA staffing levels, in the first six months of 2016 there were 223 requests¹⁹ for intermediaries that could not be matched. The pattern in this period suggested a decreasing number of unmatched requests each month, but we cannot say with any certainty that this will lead to all requests being met. The numbers unmatched may be small in relation to the overall number of requests, but every person who is not matched will not get the service vulnerable people deserve. We were keen to explore the reasons why.

¹⁹ Figures provided by the NCA on 18 July 2016.

We were informed that demand cannot be fully met due to insufficient numbers of intermediaries. No matter how many staff the NCA has, therefore, it will not be able to match all requests. In July 2016 there were 130 active intermediaries.²⁰ Given that each will have a particular specialism suitable only for certain vulnerable victims and witnesses, when compared with the number of requests being made the number of available intermediaries is limited.

The NCA's role is restricted to matching intermediaries with the needs of victims and witnesses, and therefore we explored the capacity issue further with the Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which share responsibility for the recruitment and training of intermediaries. We also spoke with the relevant lead in the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) about the inability to meet demand for witness intermediaries. They were all aware of the problem, but there was no immediate plan to increase capacity. As a result, while funding has been provided by the Ministry of Justice for an increase in NCA staff to ensure that the matching service can process requests, there are still insufficient active intermediaries to match all requests.

Prioritisation process

We found another concern with the matching process. Prioritisation for matching is based on the urgency presented by the person who requests the intermediary (which will generally be based on a wish to conduct an interview at the earliest stage), and not on the seriousness of the offence. The NCA does not record detail about the type of offence to which a victim or witness is linked (except to identify sexual offences to an intermediary to determine the response needed). The focus is on the needs of the vulnerable person and not the type of offence.

As a result, given the lack of intermediary capacity, the NCA's approach to prioritising cases may result in vulnerable victims and witnesses in serious offences not being given priority over those in lesser offences. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there is no data that allowed us to identify the types of offences linked to unmatched requests, and therefore we cannot identify the seriousness of offences that were not supported.

During our interviews with police forces, concern was raised about delays of weeks before the intermediary is available, even when a match is made. Forces were even more concerned about matches not being made at all and the lack of a process to prioritise more serious offences. The responses we received from senior investigators led us to conclude that the current situation could result in a loss of confidence in this service.

²⁰ Figures taken from NCA report to the Intermediaries Registration Board dated 18 July 2016.

We were told by forces that vulnerable people are being interviewed even when an intermediary cannot be provided. Although this is done in the interests of securing justice for them by securing evidence and dealing with an offender, it creates the risk of undermining the end result because the guidance of achieving best evidence in criminal proceedings²¹ had not been followed.

The increased demand for the intermediary service since 2013, means that the current approach to prioritisation needs to be reconsidered until there are enough intermediaries to meet demand. HMICFRS is aware that the NPCC, CPS and NCA have written to the Ministry of Justice about the shortfall and the need to reconsider prioritisation of requests until numbers can meet demand.

Recommendations

1. By 30 November 2017, the Ministry of Justice, in conjunction with the Crown Prosecution Service, should determine whether funding can be made available to recruit and train more registered witness intermediaries.
2. By 31 July 2017, the NCA, in consultation with the Ministry of Justice, National Police Chiefs' Council and the Crown Prosecution Service, should determine a more effective approach to prioritising requests for registered witness intermediaries, until there are sufficient numbers to meet demand.

National injuries database team

The national injuries database team provides a service to help investigators establish how certain kinds of injury may have been inflicted on victims. The database, which was formerly owned by Guy's Hospital, has amassed a significant number of images of injuries and explanations of their causation, from both medical sources and police investigations over many years. It was evident in our interviews with NCA officers,

and in the light of the ongoing demand for this service, that the work of this team was valued. The number of requests for the service has increased from 607 in the year to June 2014 to 737 in the year to June 2016.²²

While this service is in demand we found backlogs of work in two areas:

- case requests from police forces; and
- case papers and photographs that awaited review for upload to the database.

²¹ *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings*, Crown Prosecution Service, March 2011, paragraph 2.194. Available from: www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/best_evidence_in_criminal_proceedings.pdf

²² Figures provided by the NCA on 1 December 2016.

There was a backlog of six weeks for case requests to be reviewed. Police forces making such requests are informed of this delay at the time the request is made. In most instances, the service provided by the national injuries database team is not urgent; the team provides supporting evidence to medical experts and investigators, and is not generally used to help identify dangerous offenders at large. There are, however, time constraints within the criminal justice system when cases are progressing to trial, so any delays in obtaining supporting evidence may adversely affect the outcome. We would therefore expect all efforts to be made in reducing this backlog.

The other backlog of work is more extensive but probably not as serious. The national injuries database held over 5,000 cases at the time of our inspection, but the team was also in possession of 280 crates containing case papers and photographs that had still to be reviewed and uploaded. The content of these crates was still not fully understood by the NCA, and we were told that it included material relating to cases going back as far as 1978.

The exact numbers of cases in each crate were unknown, but a rough estimate by the team, based on 55 crates previously reviewed, suggests there may be between 3,000 and 8,000 in total i.e. possibly more than the entire number of cases already on the database. While these extra cases may contain details and images which could help to expand the data already held, we did not find strong evidence to suggest that the value of their addition to the database would warrant the time and effort involved.

We were also told by the national injuries database team during our fieldwork that it was desirable to include in the database information about less commonly-seen injuries, such as blast wounds. It should therefore be possible to prioritise injuries of importance. We were pleased to see that a review of the backlog of work was underway, and that consideration was being given to prioritising certain types of injuries. But we could not provide assurance that the backlog was even close to being dealt with, particularly as the team needed to prioritise more recent case requests. This is part of a wider problem faced by the NCA, about which we have reported before. When it was created, the NCA inherited a substantial volume of hard copy records, all of which need to be dealt with in some way.²³

Recommendation

3. By 31 March 2018, the NCA should have reviewed the backlog of cases not yet included in the database, processed those considered relevant and disposed of the remainder.

²³ *An inspection of the National Crime Agency*, HMIC, March 2015, paragraph 2.36. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/specialist-inspections/the-national-crime-agency/

Operation Marshall

The national injuries database team also has responsibility for maintaining a separate database of intrafamilial²⁴ child homicides and suspicious child deaths – the Operation Marshall database. The information held includes the cause of death, types of injuries, suspect and victim details, risk factors involved, lessons learned and experts used during the investigation and at trial. A precursor database was maintained previously by the Metropolitan Police. Responsibility for its maintenance was passed to the national injuries database team in 2010 by the Child Death Sub-group.²⁵

The database has not always been fully operational since it came to this team, as it has relied on the availability of yearly placement students to undertake the work. The database was re-launched in 2013, and great efforts have been made to raise the awareness of this service through a network of officers based in each force. The students work with forces to identify cases for inclusion but forces are not compelled to engage in this process. Since August 2015, the number of records held has risen from 280 to 406. This is a significant increase of 51 percent in one year. In comparison, only 99 cases were recorded by the end of 2010. The database is searched at the request of forces, and offers the investigator details of similar cases.

There were 13 requests made to search the database from July 2015 to July 2016. Of those requests, three had been made directly by investigators in police forces, three had been made by a single member of the NCA's crime operational support team, and the remaining seven requests were made by the Child Death Sub-group. We sought to contact all those who had made a request.

We spoke with relevant officers from two of the three police forces which had made a direct request.²⁶ They had not been aware of the database until the occasion to use it had arisen; one had been advised of the database by the NCA when making enquiries about a medical expert and the other was told about it by a line manager. One of the searches looked for cases of smothering through intoxication; while similar cases were not found, the officer saw the value of having such a repository. The other search found similar cases, which helped to inform the opinion of medical experts in her investigation. Both officers stated that they would use the service again.

²⁴ Defined by the NCA as a carer not a stranger.

²⁵ Part of the (then) Association of Chief Police Officers' Homicide Working Group. The Homicide Working Group is now coordinated under the National Police Chiefs' Council and develops national policy and practice for the investigation of homicide, major incidents and other serious crimes. It also supports and promotes the training and professional development of investigators.

²⁶ In the case of the third force, the officer who made the request had left the organisation prior to our inspection.

Also, we spoke to the officer within the crime operational support team, who was familiar with the service because he worked in the same area of the NCA. He told us that he was keen to ensure that the database continues to grow with new cases, and described how the results had helped to inform policy and operational considerations of police and other interested parties on areas such as meningitis linked to shaken baby deaths and force feeding.

In addition, we spoke to the chair of the Child Death Sub-group. This group was responsible for the largest number of requests made and has an important oversight role for the use of the database. He explained that, while the database may not have a significant day-to-day operational demand from police forces, due to the low frequency of suspicious child deaths, success was expected to come from slowly building a repository of cases that would be able to inform understanding of child deaths and thereby assist the law enforcement response.

The Child Death Sub-group has already used the database to inform discussion about various causes of death to help raise operational awareness, and has used those data to outline risk factors within guidance on child death investigations.²⁷ The chair commended the work undertaken by the placement students, but also saw a benefit from employing an analyst to exploit the data and identify emerging issues. There was also recognition that, while a lot had been done to publicise this service, more needed to be done through police force single points of contact to grow the database and increase awareness among investigators.

The Operation Marshall team had yet to introduce a feedback process at the time of our inspection, and we were told that this was due to be agreed by the Homicide Working Group. The value of the service to customers should be monitored, and the feedback process should be put in place as soon as possible, taking account of the feedback improvements we have sought across all three teams (see the area for improvement on page 35).

We recognise the significant efforts made by the NCA to ensure police forces supply the data needed for Operation Marshall. We are, however, concerned that while the benefits of the database are slowly starting to be recognised, it does not have a solid foundation for the future. The yearly turnover of placement students does not provide continuity for building this capability. We would therefore expect to see more resilient staffing arrangements to achieve the aims sought by the Child Death Sub-group.

Recommendation

4. By 30 September 2017, the NCA, in conjunction with the National Police Chiefs' Council, should have evaluated, agreed and implemented staffing arrangements that will ensure that the service provided by Operation Marshall has the stability required.

4. Crime operational support

This team provides specialist advice and support to senior investigating officers dealing with serious offences and incidents, such as murder, rape, child abduction, serious sexual offences and suspicious missing persons. It is led by two national senior investigating officer advisers who provide advice on planning and practical support to investigators. They also oversee the crime investigation support officers and specialist advisers within the team.

The crime investigation support officers provide a regional presence with police forces. They are seconded police officers who provide tactical advice and guidance, underpinned by knowledge of, and access to, the whole range of NCA support services. The specialist advisers provide advice and assistance to investigators in areas such as search, interviewing, forensics, family liaison, missing persons, geographic profiling, and behavioural science.

The crime operational support team is aligned closely with the specialist operations centre. The specialist operations centre provides office-based support to investigators and co-ordinates requests for assistance on behalf of crime operational support.

Findings

We have made a recommendation that the NCA and the police service should consult on the existing and future services provided by this team and the specialist operations centre. We have also commented on the current location of some advisers within the specialist operations centre, and whether they might be better placed within crime operational support.

In our consultation with police forces, there was positive feedback about the support provided by this team and the other teams we inspected. However, the needs of policing have changed since this service was first established: training for investigators has vastly improved; peer review and support is more commonplace; expertise and support at force and regional level in various disciplines has developed significantly, particularly in larger metropolitan forces.

The NCA must continue to respond to these changes. For instance, we established during interviews with police forces that forensic advice is now less of a priority, owing to the expertise that now exists locally. Reduced demand for the forensic service was also clear during our interviews with officers in crime operational support.

Areas of growth in specialist advice are also apparent. We were told during interviews with NCA officers that there was growing demand for the services of the interview adviser. The greater use of communications technology by criminals has

also resulted in more requests for the support of communications data advisers based in the specialist operations centre.

This growth needs to be assessed accurately and considered in future planning. We also looked at the number of deployments for individual specialist advisers for the three years to 21 June 2016²⁸ which ranged from 50 deployments for the forensic adviser to 102 for the search adviser. The data do not provide any detail on the time expended on each deployment, but they do show a differing demand for individual types of advice. We discuss the NCA's understanding of demand more broadly in our penultimate chapter.

The NCA's Annual Plan states that the Agency will "...develop, deploy and maintain those specialist capabilities and services that are best delivered nationally for the benefit of all of UK law enforcement."²⁹ We acknowledge this commitment, but our findings in this aspect of the inspection suggest that there is more to do before HMICFRS can offer assurance that the capabilities and services provided by this part of the NCA are those that are most needed.

The NCA needs to continue to develop its understanding of how well it supports the police service, as the main law enforcement customer, and ensure it provides what the service needs. We therefore consider that the current provision of services by crime operational support and the specialist operations centre needs to be revisited.

Recommendation

5. By 31 December 2017, the NCA should undertake a detailed consultation with the police service, in respect of the range of services provided by the crime operational support team and specialist operations centre, to determine which services need to be maintained and what will be required to support policing in the future.

We have already highlighted the strong link between crime operational support (largely mobile and working in the field) and the specialist operations centre (largely office-based). We noted that the national vulnerable witness interview adviser and the communications data advisers were members of the specialist operations centre, rather than members of crime operational support; the latter seems a better fit.

The national vulnerable witness adviser has management responsibility for the witness intermediary team. In reality, he spends the majority of his time away from the specialist operations centre, supporting investigations where they take place.

²⁸ Data supplied by NCA on 22 July 2016.

²⁹ *NCA Annual Plan 2016-17*, NCA, Page 9. Available from: www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/683-nca-annual-plan-2016-17/file

Therefore he has very limited capacity to provide a visible management presence for the witness intermediary team at the specialist operations centre. Nonetheless, the witness intermediary team is well supported by another supervisor on a day-to-day basis.

As mentioned earlier, the communications data advisers in addition to their primary role have to provide support to the crime and research teams within the specialist operations centre, due to shortages of staff. We were told that this is a short term measure. Ultimately it is for the NCA to decide where these roles should sit, but the communications data adviser role has more in common with the roles of the various other advisers in crime operational support.

5. Serious crime analysis section

The serious crime analysis section has a national responsibility to provide analytical support to serious sexual offence and murder investigations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The team gathers data, in the form of case papers from police forces, in respect of crimes that meet certain criteria. The team analyses the data in order to provide information that will assist investigations.

In broad terms, the criteria involve offences committed by strangers (or instances where the relationship between the victim and the offender cannot be established) and include murder with a sexual element, rape, abduction³⁰ with a sexual element and other sexual offences where there are aggravating factors³¹. The analysis involves looking for behavioural similarities between offences, which may indicate that they have been committed by the same person.

The team is supported by a network of contact officers in every police force. Contact officers (who are employed by the police rather than the NCA) are responsible for identifying relevant cases in their police force and providing the NCA with the required data.

Findings

The serious crime analysis section demonstrated how well the team can add value to investigations. We identified that the statutory codes of practice³² had been updated, but had not been laid before Parliament; we have made a recommendation in this respect. Also, we have made a recommendation concerning backlogs of cases within police forces awaiting submission to the NCA, and cases held in the serious crime analysis section awaiting input and analysis.

Within the serious crime analysis section, the focus on supporting forces to solve the most serious sexual offences is as important now as it was when it was set up in the wake of the Yorkshire Ripper investigation. The serious crime analysis section

³⁰ The serious crime analysis section defines this as cases where a victim has been moved a distance from one location to another against their will and where there has been some sexual element to the offence (physical or verbal). This would therefore involve crimes of kidnap and child abduction.

³¹ The aggravating factors include the presence of a weapon, excessive violence or burglary.

³² *Codes of Practice For Use of the Serious Crime Analysis Section, Serious Crime Analysis Section*, January 2012. Available at: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/APPREF/SCAS-Codes-of-Practice-April-2011.pdf>

gathers data from all forces on specified crime types, and enters this onto the Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System (referred to as the “ViCLAS” database) to allow for analysis.³³

We saw that the use of data within the ViCLAS database, along with the use of other databases, produced reports to police forces which included details of similar cases or additional information not previously known to an investigation (these are known as ‘positive reports’). We examined data that covered the period from April 2014 to March 2016.³⁴ This showed that, of the 3,456 cases completed³⁵, there were 947 positive reports provided to police forces.

For the same period, we also looked at examples of positive reports. We were reassured that these reports produced by the serious crime analysis section provide forces with investigative leads that can be exploited. The case study that follows explains how this analysis is beneficial.

Case study

Force A investigated a sexual offence against an elderly female by a stranger and identified a suspect. Analysis by the serious crime analysis section identified behavioural similarities between this offence and other unsolved offences in other police force areas. The investigators followed up on these offences and in particular an unsolved case in force B. As a result, they charged their suspect with this additional offence. The suspect changed his plea just before trial and has now been convicted of both offences. It is highly likely that without this work the additional offence would still be undetected, and the suspect might have maintained a not guilty plea for the first offence, thereby requiring a trial and unnecessary trauma for two elderly victims.

³³ The Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System is an investigative aid, specifically designed to assist police agencies in identifying violent crimes that may be serial in nature, and permits the analysis and linkage of such cases based on the behaviour exhibited by the offender.

³⁴ Data of completed cases and positive reports provided by the NCA on 12 May 2016.

³⁵ Includes cases fully analysed using the ViCLAS database, law enforcement databases and other database searches and/or cases that have been assessed as not suitable for analysis.

Codes of practice and timescale for submission

The statutory codes of practice apply to police forces in England and Wales³⁶, and describe the minimum standards for the provision of information to the serious crime analysis section. The original codes were laid before Parliament on 9 January 2006. The submission deadlines in the original codes were 14 days for sexual offences and 28 days for murder, from the time of the offence coming to police notice. We were told that the codes were subsequently amended in consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers³⁷ to update the crime criteria and make submission times more achievable. The version of the codes in existence at the time of our inspection (revised in January 2012) now sets a single deadline of 20 days³⁸

We examined email correspondence (including legal advice which the NCA was willing to share with HMICFRS), concerning the transition of this team from the National Policing Improvement Agency to the NCA, via the Serious and Organised Crime Agency. This advice was sought by the Home Office-led NCA transition programme in March 2012 and stated that there was no urgency to update the codes at that time. We noted in our last inspection of this area³⁹ that the revised codes had still to be laid before Parliament; this remained the case at the time of this inspection. The legal advice suggested a short-term delay in ratification due to transition but it is now long overdue. The updated codes should be laid before Parliament.

Recommendation

6. By 30 November 2017, the Home Office, in consultation with the NCA, should ensure that the revised statutory codes of practice setting standards for the submission of cases to the serious crime analysis team are laid before Parliament.

³⁶ Police Scotland, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), military police forces and forces not funded by the Home Office do not fall within the remit of these Codes, but are required to adopt the code as best practice.

³⁷ The Association of Chief Police Officers was replaced in 2015 by a new co-ordinating body for policing in England and Wales called The National Police Chiefs' Council.

³⁸ *Codes of Practice For Use of the Serious Crime Analysis Section*, Serious Crime Analysis Section, January 2012, page 7, paragraph 2.41. Available at: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/APPREF/SCAS-Codes-of-Practice-April-2011.pdf>

³⁹ *Forging the links: Rape investigation and prosecution*, HMIC/HMCPSI, London, February 2012, page 30. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/forging-the-links-rape-investigation-and-prosecution/

In accordance with the codes, police forces are required to submit data concerning murder and serious sexual offences fitting the agreed criteria⁴⁰ in at least 90 per cent⁴¹ of cases. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, forces have 20 days to submit cases unless impracticable, but in any case as soon as possible. However, we found backlogs of cases in two respects:

- in police forces, backlogs of cases awaiting submission; and
- in the NCA, backlogs of cases awaiting input or analysis.

Backlogs of cases in police forces

We looked at data concerning how police forces responded to this requirement between April 2014 and March 2016.⁴² Only one force managed to submit all relevant cases within the 20 day submission deadline. This widespread failure to comply with the revised codes of practice raises doubt whether the current timescale is achievable; compliance in this area needs more attention from police forces.

We were, however, even more concerned about cases that had been recognised by forces as meeting the criteria, but where the required data had never been supplied to the serious crime analysis section. These are known as ‘collect’ cases. We looked at the data mentioned in the previous paragraph, which showed that there were 906 collect cases.

We established that the majority of police forces (throughout the UK) had collect cases outstanding. This is not a recent phenomenon. We saw additional data regarding collect cases still outstanding from between 1998 and December 2014.⁴³ This showed that there were 4,176 such cases outstanding across all UK police forces. In June 2016, all forces with cases outstanding were advised that, because they had not supplied the NCA with the required information to enable their inclusion on the ViCLAS database and subsequent analysis, the NCA would take no further action.

From our interviews with police officers, it was apparent that many of the senior officers responsible for serious crime investigations were not aware of the performance data produced by the serious crime analysis section. This included the data described in the preceding paragraph. The contact officer in each force acts as a link with the serious crime analysis section. It was accepted by many we

⁴⁰ *Codes of Practice For Use of the Serious Crime Analysis Section*, Serious Crime Analysis Section, January 2012, page 6, paragraph 2.2.1.1-2.2.1.2. Available at: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/APPREF/SCAS-Codes-of-Practice-April-2011.pdf>

⁴¹ *Op cit.* page 6, paragraph 2.3.1.

⁴² Data provided by the NCA on 2 June 2016.

⁴³ Data provided by the NCA on 26 May 2016.

interviewed that insufficient emphasis had been placed on the importance of this role, the requirement to manage force submissions, and compliance with the codes of practice.

In our interviews with NCA officers and observations, we established that the serious crime analysis section invested heavily in building relationships with contact officers, to help foster understanding and improve processes. We were told that this investment had been frustrated by the rotation of staff in forces or where the contact officer role may be shared by more than one person. We consider that the serious crime analysis section has a thorough approach to maintaining relationships with contact officers.

We are concerned about the number of cases not being submitted by the 20 day deadline, as well as the significant number of collect cases that have never been submitted, examples of which run over many years. Such cases might have yielded investigative links to other unsolved investigations.

There are several reasons for the backlogs of cases: a lack of understanding in police forces of the serious crime analysis section's role; an underestimate of the importance of sending cases for inclusion on the ViCLAS database and analysis; and the lack of importance that forces place on the contact officer role. Police forces need to take action to comply with the requirements of the codes of practice.

Backlogs of cases in the NCA

The other area of backlog concerned those cases that had been received by the serious crime analysis section. Again, this is nothing new: in 2011 we inspected the serious crime analysis section (while it was part of the National Policing Improvement Agency) as part of a wider ranging inspection of rape investigation. That HMIC report in 2012⁴⁴ also identified backlogs of cases. At that time, the backlogs of all cases which fulfilled the criteria for a submission to be made to the serious crime analysis section were significant, with approximately 6,000 cases awaiting input, and some 3,000 cases awaiting analysis.⁴⁵

The backlog of cases has grown. The serious crime analysis section, at the time of our inspection, had 7,834 cases awaiting the input of detailed information. This represents just under a third of the total number of cases registered on the system. Furthermore, of the cases that had been input, 4,265 awaited analysis.⁴⁶ In recent

⁴⁴ *Forging the links: Rape investigation and prosecution*, HMIC/HMCPPI, London, February 2012, paragraph 2.31-2.33. Available from: www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/forging-the-links-rape-investigation-and-prosecution/

⁴⁵ Figures provided by the NCA on 26 August 2016.

⁴⁶ Figures provided by the NCA on 2 August 2016.

years there has been an increase⁴⁷ in the reporting of serious sexual offences that meet the criteria, which only adds to demand on this team and to the backlog of cases.

The backlog of cases could provide investigative links if they were added. All the time they remain in a backlog, the risk is that links to unsolved crimes cannot be made. In our interviews with police forces, there was a strong – and we consider reasonable – expectation that the cases they submitted would at the very least be put into the system, to allow for searches to be made (this is referred to as 'secondary analysis'). The backlog of cases demonstrates that this is not always happening.

We were informed during our interviews with the serious crime analysis section, however, that the police consistently asked for the most serious and recent cases to be prioritised over historical cases, in order to inform live investigations. The serious crime analysis section had adopted this approach, which we considered sensible, but we found no formal record of the police service agreement to this policy decision.

In an effort to manage the backlog of cases (rather than reduce or eradicate them) 'input pools' and 'analysis pools' have been created to prioritise cases.

- The primary and secondary input pools contain cases awaiting data entry, with primary cases largely from 2014 to 2016 and secondary before that.
- The historic input pool contains cases received between 1998 and 2009 that were not input. The cases in this pool were assessed for priority using different methodology from that used now. It seems highly unlikely that these will ever be input or analysed, as the priority is to support the most serious recent investigations.
- The primary and secondary analysis pools contain cases entered onto to the ViCLAS database but awaiting analysis, with primary cases largely from 2015 to 2016 and secondary cases received before and during 2014.

We examined a sample of the case papers that corresponded to one per cent of high, medium and low-scoring cases in each pool. This allowed us to get an indication of whether cases were being prioritised as described in the preceding paragraph. We found that cases, on the whole, fell within the pools indicated.

⁴⁷ In the three years from 1 March 2013, yearly reporting of sexual offences has grown from 3,328 cases in 2013/14 to 4,637 cases in 2015/16.

Triage analysis

Since our last inspection of this team, the NCA has improved its approach to prioritisation and filtering of new cases for input and analysis. This has been achieved through the introduction of 'triage analysts' who read all the case papers presented. The cases are then divided into three categories: urgent cases that should be brought to the attention of a senior crime analyst (e.g. such as a series offence); cases with only basic detail that may benefit from more limited analysis rather than full behavioural analysis; and cases that do not meet the criteria for submission or have insufficient behavioural characteristics to benefit from any analysis.

The triage analyst also scores the cases within the case management system to prioritise them for inputting onto the ViCLAS database, and where required, for analysis. The scoring matrix is computerised and is based on risk factors relating to the type of crime, suspect information and offence details. The triage analysts also contact the police officers submitting cases to discuss what research support may be beneficial. The officers are also notified at this point if their case will not benefit from any analysis.

We highlighted earlier in this section that some cases with basic detail may be deemed suitable for what is called 'behaviourally-limited analysis'. The serious crime analysis section see this as a means to progress certain cases more quickly, and thereby help tackle the backlogs. The triage analysts will identify such cases based on their expertise and experience. The case information must include a distinguishing feature of the offence, such as comments made by the offender while committing the offence, to enable its analysis.

We examined one such case where, following the rape of a child, the limited case information was input for a ViCLAS search. Even with limited information, the search quickly identified a suspect. The police force concerned would not have been able to do so as quickly without the NCA's help.

Despite the existence of an efficient process of triage analysis to manage the volumes of new and existing cases, the backlog still grows (albeit slowly). We were told during interviews that a lack of resources had compounded this problem in the past. It was also suggested to us that, because of an impending office relocation in 2017, there will be a loss of expertise as not all staff would be relocating. Add to this an increase in reporting of serious sexual offences and this presents a problem that cannot be ignored. A succession of senior leaders (mostly from precursor organisations) has not dealt with the issues effectively. There is risk in the volume of cases that are not actioned; and while officers are committed to providing an excellent service, the growing backlog of work was a concern to some of those we interviewed.

The backlogs contain cases going back to when this team was formed in 1998. This is, therefore, not a new problem: the NCA cannot be held wholly responsible. The NCA has had oversight of this team since October 2013, and while we established that the risk in the backlog of cases was recognised at a senior level in June 2016, there now needs to be a structured approach to deciding on the next steps.

The serious crime analysis section has estimated that to keep up with the demand in the primary input pool it would need to recruit three additional assistant crime analysts. It also estimated that to achieve analysis on 100 percent of cases, it would need five extra crime analysts. To clear all the cases in the pools and deal with the backlog would probably need 20 more assistant crime analysts, and would take five years.

We consider that, in the interests of public safety and confidence, in policing and the NCA, concerted action must now be taken by both parties to eradicate the backlogs of cases or bring them down to a minimum. This should begin with immediate action to stop the backlog of cases growing.

Recommendation

7. By 31 December 2017, the Director General of the NCA, in consultation with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for Crime Operations, should devise and implement a plan to: remove the backlog of cases held by forces that have not been submitted to the NCA; secure compliance with the codes of practice; deal with the backlog of cases held by the NCA awaiting input and analysis; and ensure that the prioritisation and triage approach is jointly agreed and is as effective as possible.

6. Themes relevant to all three teams

In this chapter we concentrate on themes relevant to the teams we inspected: the specialist operations centre, crime operational support and serious crime analysis section.

Findings

We found that the purpose of the three teams within the NCA was absolutely clear and that officers understood their role. Management meetings, on the whole, dealt efficiently with business. Nonetheless, we have made some further recommendations. There should be consistent recording of decision making; all relevant performance data should be visible to managers; understanding of demand should be better; and the various feedback processes to improve the conduct of business should be reconciled.

We established that, in the main, NCA officers had access to the information they needed to support their roles. They clearly understood the importance of information security, and were able to pass relevant information to police forces, when required, in a timely fashion.

There were good examples of training and development for officers, but there should be greater consistency across all teams. Recruitment and retention pose various problems, but efforts are being made where possible to address these. We fully recognise the efforts made by the teams to publicise the services offered and how to access them, but more needs to be done in conjunction with the police service to improve the understanding of this work.

Oversight and governance arrangements

The Specialist Operations Delivery Plan⁴⁸ outlines the mission of the teams we inspected and provides clarity of direction. Officers clearly understood their roles, and this was linked to objectives within their personal development documents.

Crime operational support, the specialist operations centre and the serious crime analysis section have their own individual oversight meetings. We observed at least one meeting in each area during our field work. The meetings varied in their style but generally dealt efficiently with team business. We did find that there needs to be greater consistency across all teams in terms of recording decision making to track progress. For example, full support to cases within the national injuries database had

⁴⁸ *Specialist Operations Delivery Plan*, NCA, 2016-17 (Official).

been suspended for four weeks before our fieldwork. We were told that this key decision had been taken at the specialist operations centre senior management team, but no record had been kept of this meeting for review.

Area for improvement

- By 31 May 2017, there should be consistent and auditable recording of decisions at all management meetings for the three teams inspected.

Risk management

There are no formal processes for the identification or management of risk within any of the management meetings for the oversight of the three teams. More significant risks, concerning backlogs and the impact of accommodation moves within the serious crime analysis section, were only added after we started the inspection.

We acknowledge that risks are now examined outside the senior management meeting to ensure they are given due consideration. We welcome this move, and expect to see risks speedily drawn to the attention of senior management by teams within the command, and clear plans for their management put in place. During our interviews with officers we were reassured that they felt confident to raise potential risks with their line manager.

Performance management

While the NCA Annual Plan and the Specialist Operations Delivery Plan make it clear what services should be provided, there was no evidence of performance measures set at command level. We established that most reporting to the command senior management team was based on quantity rather than the quality of activity (although there is some measurement where there has been disruption of criminal activity). We were told that an NCA delivery plan is being developed which aims to provide a clear performance requirement that measures the quality and quantity of activity, from command level to individual units.

The operational head with the responsibility for the three teams has agreed performance-reporting measures with each of his team managers to ensure that activity is on track. We have examined the performance measures and resulting data that provides a comprehensive overview of activity. The data are provided to the operational head by each team, but are not visible to all managers, or discussed by the senior management team. Visibility of performance data would help inform other managers and allow them to respond to pressures in other teams.

Within the specialist operations centre, we found that the constituent teams did not readily share performance information. It took a meeting between the national injuries database manager and crime team manager for the scale of the backlog

within the national injuries database to be recognised. This recognition allowed for better management of workloads but the problem would have been obvious earlier if performance data had been visible and shared.

Area for improvement

- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should ensure that, to help improve efficiency, relevant performance data for the three teams are visible to managers.

Understanding demand

We examined data on how demand is measured and managed. The crime operational support activity is based on the number of deployments to investigations. While this provides the frequency of activity it does not provide the quality of data that would help understand the true picture of demand.

As far as capacity allows, crime operational support responds to what police forces need. The deployment figures have been fairly constant over the past four years, but do not accurately provide a picture of the time expended by each advisor on each case. This is problematic when trying to argue for more officers, or indeed to establish whether some services are truly needed.

The witness intermediary team can also demonstrate the number of requests made and matched, but not the true impact of that workload. We saw a business case that sought additional officers to support this team. This was purely based on the significant increase in requests since 2013.

The national injuries database team manager is reviewing roles within the team, taking demand into account. This detailed work showed a good understanding of the need to understand workload and aimed to improve resilience across roles to meet demand.

The serious crime analysis section was the only team which could determine, in detail, what was needed to meet demand. It had created clear timelines for the expected throughput of cases, and these can be used for demand analysis purposes.

We have already highlighted the need for the NCA to consult with the police service more fruitfully in the future (recommendation 5). A better understanding of demand will be needed to help determine what it takes to meet the volume of requests for those services.

Area for improvement

- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should have completed work to provide a better understanding of demand across the three teams.

The use and management of information

We established, that on the whole, NCA officers had access to the information that they needed to carry out their role, although there were concerns that some officers were using personal devices to conduct open source research⁴⁹. The research team within the specialist operations centre has access to a wide variety of law enforcement and other databases, and support from this team should be sought instead of using personal devices.

We examined systems and processes for dealing with information within the serious crime analysis section, the national injuries database team, crime team, research team and witness intermediary team. The crime operational support advisers rely on the specialist operations centre systems and processes, as they predominantly work out of the office supporting investigations.

The case management and the ViCLAS database system used by the serious crime analysis section, the database used by the national injuries team, the witness intermediary database and remedy case management systems used within the specialist operations centre, were effective in the support of those roles. It was reassuring to note that work is being undertaken as part of the NCA's change programme, to examine how the existing provision will fit with the NCA's wider plan for improving information technology.

There was positive feedback from police forces on the timeliness and quality of written information provided by the three teams. We had expected that the NCA's information technology systems might have prevented the effective dissemination of information, owing to the problems highlighted in previous HMICFRS inspections. However, upon inspection we found that the difficulties that existed were the same problems encountered in most large computer networks, where large file sizes can adversely affect the file transfer processes. The NCA manage the transfer of data by reducing file sizes where possible.

We also examined a system of peer review within the serious crime analysis section, the specialist operations centre and crime operational support, which ensured that

⁴⁹ In this context, open source material is information that is openly available on the internet and can be viewed by any person with access to the worldwide web.

the information being provided in written reports was of an acceptable standard. The peer review process works well and did not appear to delay dissemination.

We were satisfied that the importance of information security was well understood. All officers had completed a civil service e-learning package that reinforced understanding of their obligations. The security of the information held in paper and electronic format was good, and while a number of databases were in use they were all accessed via NCA desktop computers. This ensures that individual databases, and the sensitive information they contain, are protected by consistent security.

While we have identified backlogs of cases in the national injuries database team and the serious crime analysis section, there was clear direction on how long information should be retained by the NCA.

Learning from feedback

We looked at the feedback processes that were being used to help improve service delivery. In the serious crime analysis section this was centrally managed. Within the specialist operations centre, feedback was individually managed by the national injuries database team, the crime team and the witness intermediary team, and within crime operational support the behavioural investigative advisers and other advisers also had a feedback process.

The various feedback processes received variable responses in terms of numbers and the detail provided. However, there is an opportunity to reduce the various feedback processes across the three teams and to rationalise how customer responses are received and assessed.

Area for improvement

- By 30 September 2017, the NCA should improve the efficiency of the feedback collection processes across the three teams, by reducing the number of discrete processes from five to one.

Training

We examined whether there was an adequate plan in place for the training and development of NCA officers. Within the serious crime analysis section there was a clear training and mentoring plan in place for all officers.

Advisers within crime operational support are employed on the basis of their training, specialist skills and experience. The need for training is therefore not a major concern, but maintaining skills and knowledge is important. Continual professional development was self-driven, and while officers felt supported in their efforts, a more formally agreed plan would assure us that advisors maintain their currency.

In common with crime operational support, some officers within the specialist operations centre are recruited to advisory roles because of their highly specialist skills and depth of experience, while others are recruited to administrative or research-based roles. There was no training plan or formal continual professional development across the different disciplines in the specialist operations centre. Generally, officers had access to development opportunities, (e.g. input from specialists for witness intermediary officers) but there was no obvious structure.

We also examined what accreditation⁵⁰ was in place. Officers within the serious crime analysis section, while experienced, have no formal accreditation, although the NCA is creating development opportunities for analysts. The detective inspector within the crime team, and the two national senior investigating officer advisers, are accredited investigators under the 'professionalising investigation programme'.⁵¹

There needs to be a clearer plan in place to provide appropriate training and continuing professional development to ensure that knowledge and experience is current and high quality.

Recommendation

8. By 31 July 2017, the NCA should have a plan in place for training and the continual professional development of all officers across the three teams.

Recruitment and retention

Planning how to maintain a stable and suitably qualified workforce in the future is essential to the efficiency of any team. We were satisfied that recruitment and retention is a management priority, but it has been frustrated by delays in start dates for new recruits due to a vetting system that is struggling to meet demand.

We were told that there was rarely any opportunity for overlap or handover between outgoing and incoming advisers. This is important when handing over from one specialist to another but were told that it could not be catered for within human resource recruitment processes. The specialist and niche nature of such roles is not being properly catered for in the recruitment process.

The impending move of the serious crime analysis section is creating uncertainty as to whether it will be able to retain skilled officers. Even now it takes three to six months, depending on their progress, to train officers which means that not all are fully able to perform their role. We were told by the operational head that he will be able to maintain a recruitment reserve list to reduce gaps in capability.

⁵⁰ Accredited training in law enforcement is commonly approved by the College of Policing.

⁵¹ This ensures that officers are trained, skilled and accredited to conduct the highest quality investigations.

Promotion and publicity of services

During our interviews with police forces, a common theme that emerged was a call for the NCA to promote greater awareness among investigators of the services it offered. Senior officers in police forces are aware of the services provided, but most investigators are not. The police forces interviewed for this report accepted that the police service needed to play a part in improving this awareness.

We saw clear evidence that the NCA had engaged with the police service: assisting with training courses and seminars, national police meetings, and meeting with investigation teams. This demonstrated a significant commitment. The NCA's regional organised crime co-ordinators have been useful points of contact and advocates for the services provided by the three teams.

The services offered are highlighted by the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice⁵², and contact details for relevant NCA teams are available via the Police Online Knowledge Area (POLKA)⁵³, but we were not convinced that this was enough. Between 75 and 85 percent of activity, over the past two years, was repeat business from individual investigators who had already used the services provided by this part of the NCA.⁵⁴ It is encouraging to see the same investigators coming back again; but it also suggests that awareness needs to be raised across a wider group of investigators.

Historically the services offered, and the method of contact, were also promoted through poster campaigns. While we have entered a digital age, we detected an appetite in police forces and the NCA for this more traditional means of communication.

We also looked at how well the three teams have promoted their role within the NCA. In our interviews with officers many felt that a lot had been done. We would agree: the role of the three teams has become much better known within the agency. For example, crime-related enquiries received by the specialist operations centre from other parts of the NCA in 2016 had increased significantly compared with the frequency under the NCA's precursor organisation, the serious and organised crime agency (SOCA), in 2011.

⁵² Authorised Professional Practice is authorised by the College of Policing as the official source of professional practice on policing.

⁵³ POLKA is the Police OnLine Knowledge Area, a secure online collaboration tool for the policing community to network, ask questions, share insights, discuss ideas and suggest new ways of working.

⁵⁴ Data supplied by the NCA on 18 July 2016.

7. Conclusion

In order to provide reassurance about this specialist area of the NCA and how it provides support to serious crime investigation, our terms of reference required us to address the following questions:

- How effective are the services provided by the serious crime analysis section, crime operational support and the specialist operations centre?
- How efficiently are these services provided?

To answer these questions we examined each team and themes relevant to their efficiency and effectiveness. The centralised service provided by these teams has been developed over many years to support serious crime investigations. The capability of police forces has also developed, but they cannot offer the same breadth and depth of support.

We were impressed with the dedication and commitment of officers in each team and across the spectrum of services provided. They are providing support that is held in high regard by the police service. However, we were not reassured that all services meet the current needs of investigations, and the NCA has to do more work to meet current and future needs. The NCA recognises this.

Officers were able to access information to enhance advice and support, and to provide this information to recipients securely. The systems and processes we examined for using data were sound. We did find that there needs to be a better prioritisation process within the witness intermediary team until the number of witness intermediaries can be increased.

We sought reassurance about the efficiency of the three teams in a number of ways. Ultimately, there must be clarity of purpose: this was well articulated by the NCA (and understood by NCA officers) as being the requirement to be a national capability in support of serious crime investigations.

We were, in the main, very satisfied with management oversight but we have recommended improvement in certain areas (e.g. records of decision making).

The backlogs of cases – largely inherited from precursor organisations – within the serious crime analysis section, while managed efficiently, caused significant concern. Police forces also have backlogs of cases awaiting submission which need to be addressed. Any delay in doing so poses a risk to public confidence in the ability of the NCA and policing to tackle the most serious crimes.

We have made eight recommendations, and identified four areas for improvement. We acknowledge that some of our more significant concerns (e.g. backlogs of cases) relate to problems inherited from precursor agencies, but, regardless, these need the

earliest attention. The NCA cannot deal with these concerns alone. The police service, and interested parties within the criminal justice system, also have a responsibility in some of the areas where we seek improvement.

Therefore, we conclude that the three teams provided an effective and efficient service; but in order to meet the needs of present-day policing, we would wish to see a concerted effort to respond to the recommendations and areas for improvement in this report.

Annex A

Our inspection took place during June, July and August 2016 and examined the serious crime analysis section, the specialist operations centre, and crime operational support.

Our terms of reference required us to inspect the efficiency and effectiveness of the services provided by this function of the NCA.

This function was inherited by the NCA and was historically set up nationally to provide support to police forces on serious crime investigations. It was essential that the police service, as the main customer, was consulted on its use of the services provided to inform our fieldwork. Twelve police forces were interviewed which helped to highlight strengths and weaknesses. The forces were selected on the frequency of use of the services provided, and their compliance with submissions required by the serious crime analysis section.

The inspection team had to gain the best understanding of the functions within the serious crime analysis section and crime operational support. We spent the first day of the fieldwork in these areas observing and speaking to officers as they carried out their roles.

We interviewed officers of various grades, as well as the director and deputy director of the organised crime command to which the three teams belong. In addition, we interviewed other senior representatives in law enforcement and criminal justice from areas such as the Ministry of Justice, the Crown Prosecution Service and National Police Chiefs' Council.

We reviewed a series of documents relating to the three teams in support of their operational practices and other business processes. We examined more than 50 documents.

During our inspection, we also examined the internal computer databases used and considered whether they allowed officers to discharge their duties effectively.

We further considered whether the staffing levels were appropriate and examined whether the officers had the required skills to carry out their responsibilities.