

# National Crime Agency

An inspection of effectiveness and  
efficiency

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# HM Inspector's summary

This report presents the findings of our first organisation-wide inspection of the National Crime Agency (NCA) since it was established in 2013. We inspected the agency's effectiveness and efficiency in discharging its statutory functions, particularly in relation to its critical role in leading the UK's response to [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#).

Since 2015, we have carried out individual inspections of the NCA, and we have included the NCA in some of our national [thematic inspections](#). However, this is the first time we have inspected the NCA's overall effectiveness and efficiency and given graded judgments.

When we developed the assessment framework for this inspection, it was clear that some aspects of [the police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy \(PEEL\) assessment framework](#) would be relevant, while others would not. Unlike police forces in England and Wales, the NCA doesn't yet have a history of graded inspections. It also doesn't have a cohort of 43 comparable organisations, which we can use to benchmark our findings.

Nevertheless, many of its functions can be compared to those that are carried out in a wide range of public and private sector organisations. These functions include HR, IT and information management, performance management, and learning and development.

As part of our inspection, we examined the agency's operational effectiveness, resource management and strategic planning. Our findings highlight the challenges the NCA faces in fulfilling its statutory responsibilities and its ability to meet the full scope of demand placed on it. Over the past 5 years, the NCA has increased the size of its workforce by 21 percent. This growth is a result of sustained investment. It also reflects recognition of the agency's expanding role in tackling SOC.

During our inspection, we found that the NCA's IT infrastructure wasn't fit for purpose. This significantly hinders the agency's ability to operate effectively and efficiently. I have identified this as a [cause of concern](#), and I make recommendations to the NCA and the Home Office to address it.

The agency has effective governance structures in place, and its performance framework is aligned to its strategic priorities. Given the agency's important role in UK law enforcement, it must be able to keep rapidly evolving and responding to the

demands of a dynamic and complex threat landscape. To achieve this, the NCA needs to:

- secure further sustained investment;
- carry out its strategic planning more effectively; and
- maintain a commitment to continuous improvement.

The NCA receives annual funding settlements. In 2024/25, about 20 percent of its funding came from ring-fenced, external sources. At the time of our inspection, we found that the agency didn't have a medium-term financial strategy.

The current funding structure constrains the NCA's ability to align its strategic and medium-term financial planning. We found that both its capital and revenue budgets were under sustained pressure. We also found legacy IT systems and technical debt, which restrict the agency's ability to modernise.

It is important that the NCA resolves the problem with its funding structure. This would help it improve its agility and respond more effectively to emerging threats.

During our inspection, we examined whether the agency effectively deploys its resources across its strategic, investigative and intelligence functions. We found that the NCA frequently makes complex decisions about prioritising the most critical threats, often in the face of unpredictable and rapidly emerging demands.

Inevitably, this approach can lead to situations in which the NCA can't meet some known demands. This could present a risk to public safety and national security. As the NCA operates in the wider law enforcement system, any unmet demand could be diverted to [regional organised crime units](#) and local police forces. However, these organisations are also unlikely to have the capacity to absorb this additional pressure.

Therefore, we found that at the time of our inspection, the NCA didn't have enough resources to meet all aspects of the demand that the Government was asking it to meet.

During our inspection, we spoke to members of the workforce across the NCA. The breadth and diverse nature of the NCA's work means that many of its officers come from police forces, other law enforcement agencies, the Civil Service and external recruitment. We found that while this offers obvious potential benefits, it can also lead to a lack of clarity in leadership and accountability. It also sometimes results in different employment terms within teams.

We saw how these differences can sometimes negatively affect the NCA's organisational cohesion. To minimise this, the NCA must continue to clarify roles and responsibilities. It should also continue to foster a unified organisational culture through its strategic plan and leadership approach.

While many of the NCA's operations don't directly involve [victims](#), some do. It is essential that the agency makes sure victim care and [safeguarding](#) are integral to operational planning and delivery. We found a strategic commitment to achieving this, but the NCA must continue to work on embedding a victim-centred approach across all relevant areas of its work.

Despite these challenges, we found that NCA officers showed professionalism, resilience and a strong public service ethos.

The NCA investigates high-harm cases very well. These cases are often complex and in high-risk environments. The agency has specialist capabilities, which aren't routinely available to police forces. When it uses them effectively, it produces some outstanding results from some highly successful investigations and disruptions.

The NCA must continue to invest in leadership development across the whole agency. During our inspection, we found that the NCA needs to improve the way it supervises some of its officers and their workloads. By investing further in developing its future leaders, including those currently in supervisory roles, the agency will be better equipped to make sure it gives the right support and guidance to all operational teams.

The NCA also needs to improve its understanding of its total crime-related demand. This includes improving the way it collects and analyses data, and the way it shares intelligence across the system. By developing a more comprehensive picture of threat and demand, the NCA can better align its resources and capabilities to national priorities.

To provide a co-ordinated and effective response to SOC, the NCA must collaborate well with partners across law enforcement, government and the private sector. We found that this is a strong area of performance. The NCA works well with a broad range of partners and stakeholders.

This approach is vital, as the NCA is an important part of the UK's national security infrastructure. In our inspection report, we have highlighted the significant challenges it faces. However, we also found that the agency has considerable strengths.

The need for sustainable and targeted investment in the NCA's IT infrastructure and systems cannot be underestimated. The agency also needs to improve business planning, workforce management and HR processes. If these changes are agreed and supported, the NCA is well positioned to enhance its impact and to continue to improve the way it protects the public from SOC.



**Lee Freeman KPM**

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

# Introduction

## About this inspection

### The National Crime Agency

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is responsible for leading, supporting and co-ordinating the UK's response to [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#). To do this, the agency works with more than 75 organisations in what is referred to in the '[National Strategic Assessment 2025 of Serious and Organised Crime](#)' as "the SOC system". These organisations include law enforcement and criminal justice bodies, the UK [intelligence](#) community, government departments, local authorities, regulatory and professional bodies, and overseas law enforcement agencies. The organisations in the SOC system also work with the academic, private and third sectors.

The NCA is an operationally independent, non-ministerial government department. It was formally established in October 2013 under the provisions of Part 1 of the [Crime and Courts Act 2013](#), and it brought together several law enforcement functions. The aim was to create a single, co-ordinated body capable of leading the national response to SOC.

The NCA is in a unique position in the UK's law enforcement community. It differs from police forces and other organisations in terms of its statutory responsibilities, operational functions and governance arrangements. The NCA director general is accountable to the Home Secretary, and to scrutiny by Parliament and the devolved administrations.

Since 2013, the NCA has experienced substantial growth in scale and capability. For example, since 2020, its workforce has increased by 21 percent, which reflects sustained investment and organisational development. At the time of our inspection, the NCA had about 5,950 personnel and an annual budget of just over £1 billion.

### Our report, terms of reference and methodology

Section 11 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 requires us to inspect the NCA. Following an inspection, we must report to the Home Secretary on the NCA's effectiveness and efficiency.

Our terms of reference were to address the following questions:

- How well does the NCA discharge its statutory functions?
- How well do leadership, strategic direction and the culture in the NCA contribute to it discharging these functions?

During our inspection, we assessed how well the NCA performed in six main areas:

- making and implementing strategic plans, and assessing performance;
- managing its finances and making sure it is effective and efficient;
- building, developing and supporting its workforce, and fostering a culture of integrity, compliance and inclusivity in the workplace;
- understanding and prioritising the threat from SOC;
- investigating SOC; and
- leading, supporting and co-ordinating a collaborative response to SOC.

We carried out our inspection between February and June 2025 in 13 NCA sites across the UK.

During our inspection we:

- reviewed more than 1,300 documents;
- collected 7,865 pieces of evidence;
- carried out reviews of 19 operations;
- reviewed 89 investigation case files;
- reviewed 30 grievance files;
- reviewed 34 conduct investigation files;
- interviewed 219 senior leaders, NCA officers, representatives from other organisations and independent stakeholders;
- held 114 focus groups with NCA officers and representatives from other organisations;
- carried out [reality testing](#), speaking to NCA officers to gather their views of the NCA; and
- carried out a survey of 299 representatives of organisations that the NCA works with.

Paragraph 3 of Schedule 6 to the Crime and Courts Act 2013 requires the Home Secretary to arrange for every HMICFRS report commissioned under the Act to be published in a manner they consider appropriate.

The legislation also allows any part of the relevant report to be excluded from publication if it:

- would be against the interests of national security;
- could prejudice how crime is prevented or detected, how offenders are apprehended or how offences are prosecuted; or
- might jeopardise the safety of any person.

In December 2025, we gave the Home Secretary our report on the inspection of the NCA’s effectiveness and efficiency. That report included detail of operational matters that weren’t suitable for the public domain. As a result, and in consultation and agreement with the NCA, we have prepared this version of the report with the relevant operational matters excluded. The Home Secretary subsequently asked us to publish this version of the report.

## Our judgments

During our inspection, we assessed the effectiveness and efficiency of the NCA. We make graded judgments as follows:

Outstanding	Good	Adequate	Requires improvement	Inadequate
	Achieving strategic priorities	Understanding serious organised crime threats	Managing finances	
	Investigating serious and organised crime		Building the workforce	
	Leading collaboration			

## Terminology in this report

This report contains references to, among other things, ‘national’ definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes.

In some instances, ‘national’ means applying to England or Wales, or England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland, or the whole of the United Kingdom.

# Cause of concern

During our inspections, we sometimes find serious, critical or systemic shortcomings in practice, policy or performance. We call these findings [causes of concern](#). In our reports, we usually include commentary on causes of concern in the relevant chapters.

In this inspection, we have identified a cause of concern. The overall impact is far-reaching, and it reduces the NCA's effectiveness and efficiency across all aspects covered by our inspection. As a result, we have included it in this report as a standalone item.

## **Cause of concern: The National Crime Agency must urgently improve its IT capability and strategy**

The National Crime Agency (NCA)'s IT infrastructure isn't fit for purpose. This systemic weakness affects the entire agency, and we mention it many times throughout this report. It significantly hinders its ability to operate effectively and efficiently. It also stifles innovation and creates an over-reliance on inefficient manual processes.

Over many years, a lack of investment in IT infrastructure has caused a technical debt for the NCA. This is the increasing cost of replacing outdated systems due to the agency having to prioritise quick IT fixes over long-term investment and solutions. During our inspection, we heard that each month, about 70 percent of critical IT incidents related to technical debt.

The absence of a single, clear IT strategy – with defined timescales, cost estimates and a plan of what is going to change – compounds this problem. Additionally, short-term and externally controlled funding cycles constrain the pace and scale of change.

During our inspection, some interviewees told us that the agency's IT was a major factor that inhibited their productivity and efficiency. Most of the officers we interviewed were critical of the existing systems, which many of them didn't trust.

Many officers told us that the pace at which the agency was dealing with its IT problems was too slow. Many told us that the delayed and protracted roll-out of a system upgrade had been difficult, especially as several of the agency's systems and applications weren't compliant with the new system.

Many also said that the agency's IT hindered them in their role. Interviewees gave us examples of situations in which they had to:

- enter information more than once;
- use manual systems; and
- use manual handling to share data with external partners.

Many officers told us that the agency didn't even have a personnel directory, which they could use to direct them to the right contact for queries. This meant it was difficult for them to find the right person to speak to. This is inefficient and affects productivity.

The NCA's poor IT also affects officers' morale, and this was shown in the agency's 2024 people survey. Only 33 percent of respondents said they had the tools they needed to do their job effectively.

One interviewee told us: "IT is a blocker; we achieve in spite of it." Another said: "When I started in policing 15 to 20 years ago, I had better technology than I do in the NCA."

The NCA uses a corporate case management system, ATLAS CM. However, officers told us that up to 50 different case management methods are in use in the agency, including spreadsheets and other manual systems. This is often because officers don't have confidence in the NCA's corporate system. As a result, the agency's approach to case management is inconsistent.

The agency hasn't yet completed its programme to allow officers to automatically transfer data between computer systems. These operate on each of the three security tiers of the '[Government Security Classifications Policy](#)'. Most officers in the agency use at least two laptops to carry out their role. We spoke to some officers who had to use four laptops. Many officers told us about the difficulties and frustrations involved in using multiple laptops, and the resulting inefficiencies. We also saw these problems first hand.

## Recommendations

These problems aren't solely the NCA's to resolve. The Home Office is also responsible for enabling and supporting the necessary transformation. Substantial investment and a more co-ordinated approach are needed. This includes urgently developing a costed IT strategy and, together with the Home Office, implementing the recommendations from [our 'National Crime Agency inspection: The effectiveness and efficiency of the National Data Exploitation Capability' report](#).

The Home Office should approach the challenges associated with securing the necessary funding as a high priority.

### Recommendation 1

By 30 September 2026, the NCA, working with the Home Office, should produce a long-term (for example, ten-year) costed IT strategy. This should:

- define the NCA's IT requirements;
- remove dependency on its legacy IT systems; and
- make sure that over the term of the strategy, the NCA can achieve the transformation it needs.

### Recommendation 2

By 30 September 2026, the NCA should develop a clear three to five year medium-term financial strategy. This plan should reflect the financial implications of the IT strategy and agreed Home Office funding. It should include:

- an estimate of future costs and funding;
- priorities for investment;
- potential future financial challenges and changes in demand;
- the actions it needs to take to address any challenges and changes; and
- testing of the financial assumptions in the plan.

### Recommendation 3

By 30 September 2026, the NCA should develop a plan that sets out a clear timescale for integrating and improving its HR and finance IT processes, and for implementing an enterprise resource planning system.

We also reiterate recommendations 1 and 2 from [our 'National Crime Agency inspection: An inspection of the effectiveness and efficiency of the National Data Exploitation Capability' report](#), which are still outstanding.

# Achieving strategic priorities

## Good

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is good at achieving its strategic priorities.

To help the NCA protect the public from [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#), the NCA strategy for 2023–28 sets out four priorities:

- degrading the most harmful [organised crime groups](#);
- leading the UK's operational response;
- transforming the agency's capabilities; and
- growing a highly skilled workforce.

We found that the agency had effective governance structures, and its performance framework was aligned to its strategic priorities. Senior leaders understand the agency's performance against the strategic priorities. In general, the agency communicates effectively with its workforce, making sure officers understand the agency's strategy and priorities.

However, the NCA needs to improve its corporate support functions so it can evaluate, direct and further support its strategic direction and operational delivery.

## Innovative practice

### **The National Crime Agency encourages independent scrutiny of its performance, using non-executive directors to give oversight and guidance to its board**

Unlike many UK law enforcement agencies, the National Crime Agency (NCA) has non-executive directors (NEDs). They give independent oversight and guidance to the NCA board, on which they sit. They also offer support, challenge, advice and scrutiny.

Each of the four NEDs has a portfolio in the agency that best uses their technical expertise. For example, one of the NEDs is fully involved in the agency's business planning process. He liaises with the NCA director general over the management of the NCA board, including planning future agendas and considering themes to examine. Another NED has completed a high-level independent strategic technology review. A third NED chairs the agency's audit risk and assurance committee. The fourth NED's portfolio includes [intelligence](#) and investigations.

The NEDs focus on strategic direction and governance, rather than day-to-day operational matters. Using NEDs helps the NCA to reflect and ask itself difficult questions.

## Area for improvement

### **The National Crime Agency needs to improve its corporate support function**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) needs a corporate support function that helps it evaluate, direct and support its strategic direction and operational delivery.

The corporate support function should:

- effectively and robustly track recommendations from internal and external audits;
- carry out audits and reviews;
- monitor compliance with policies; and
- keep policies, strategies and terms of reference documents current and relevant.

At the start of our inspection, the NCA provided us with some of the plans it uses to support its overarching NCA Strategy 2023–28. We found that some of these plans were out of date, and others were inconsistent with the timeframe of the 2023–28 strategy. The NCA has since updated and revised some of those plans, and it has provided more up-to-date versions of other documents.

We reviewed the terms of reference and policies for the agency's governance meetings. We found that most of the documents were clear and that the NCA reviewed them regularly. However, that wasn't always the case. The agency hadn't reviewed some terms of reference documents in accordance with its established schedules.

We found that the NCA's risk and resilience forum was responsible for the risk that agency officers were following out-of-date policies. This was because the agency wasn't reviewing some policy documents on time or when there were changes in legislation. This could lead to officers working according to outdated policy or legislation. It also results in poor compliance in audits.

A wide range of organisations audit the NCA and make recommendations. At the time of our inspection, the NCA had 115 ongoing recommendations from 7 external organisations. A total of 37 of these recommendations were overdue.

The performance assurance and risk (PAR) team reports to the audit risk and assurance committee (ARAC) and the executive committee about recommendations. However, interviewees told us there was no standalone forum to regularly review and examine the progress of recommendations. The time available at ARAC and the executive committee to do this depended on what else was on their agendas. Interviewees told us that the PAR team was small, and that it didn't have enough capacity to oversee recommendations effectively.

We reviewed the papers for the July 2025 ARAC meeting. They showed that the PAR team gave the ARAC an update on recommendations. However, there was no detail about how long the overdue recommendations had been outstanding, or what the open recommendations were. As such, the ARAC couldn't effectively scrutinise or challenge why recommendations were taking so long to complete.

At the time of our inspection, the NCA didn't have a dedicated team to carry out audits and reviews, or to monitor compliance with policies. A dedicated team would give senior leaders better information and an improved understanding of how effectively the agency is performing.

## Main findings

In this section we set out our main findings that relate to how well the NCA achieves its strategic priorities.

### **The agency's senior leadership structure reflects the breadth and complexity of its operational remit**

The NCA's senior leadership team includes a large number of directors and deputy directors. According to the NCA's December 2024 structure chart, there were 15 posts of director and above, and 35 deputy directors.

Some interviewees told us they felt that the agency was "top heavy" with leaders. This was particularly the case among lower-grade officers and interviewees who viewed the NCA as a law enforcement agency (rather than a government department).

However, other interviewees – often those who viewed the NCA as part of the Civil Service – said they thought the number of senior leaders was appropriate. One interviewee said this was because of the engagement and negotiation the agency does at a strategic level. Another interviewee told us that in respect of the number of senior civil servants, the NCA is “incredibly light”.

In our view, the structure reflects the breadth and complexity of the NCA’s operational remit, and the level of risks it holds. Deputy directors have national – and in some cases, international – responsibility for:

- specific threat areas – for example, organised immigration crime (OIC), firearms, drugs, cybercrime, [child sexual exploitation](#) and abuse, and economic crime; and
- strategic functions, such as intelligence, data, legal services, and technology.

This approach helps the agency maintain specialist expertise and respond effectively to diverse and evolving crime threats. The agency has designed its leadership model to support multi-agency co-ordination – for example, through the [National Economic Crime Centre](#).

### **The agency understands the importance of how officers feel about their leaders, and it is starting to invest in this area**

The NCA has several ways of identifying how its officers perceive their leaders. These include an annual people survey, pulse surveys, focus groups and communication with the unions that represent the agency’s workforce. The agency publishes the results of these measures. It also updates the workforce on what it is doing to address concerns. In its analysis of its 2024 people survey, the agency identified that leadership skills and behaviours were areas of concern that needed improvement.

During our inspection, senior leaders at the NCA told us about some of the things they had put in place to raise leadership standards. These include a bespoke management development programme, the purpose of which is to give essential leadership skills to first and second-line managers. The programme includes training on how to hold difficult conversations and address challenging behaviour. Other interviewees spoke positively about this programme.

The agency recognises that it needs to increase the number of women in leadership roles. It is running several programmes for under-represented groups, including a female senior leaders’ development programme and the Empower programme for officers from ethnic minority backgrounds.

## **Comprehensive analysis supports the NCA's strategic plans**

The NCA produces the '[National Strategic Assessment 2025 of Serious and Organised Crime](#)' (NSA). We refer to this in more detail in [our chapter on understanding and prioritising the threat from SOC](#). The agency told us that the NSA is central to its response to SOC. Interviewees from the agency and its partner organisations told us that the NSA sets the agenda and priorities for targeting SOC nationally. The agency produces the NSA after considering regional strategic assessments.

The NSA informs the NCA Strategy 2023–28. We found that effective analysis supported the strategy, and that the agency updates the NSA each year.

The agency told us that towards the end of 2025, it intended to review its performance against the NCA Strategy 2023–28 and decide if it needs to update the strategy. This review will consider the agency's financial settlement under the Government's 2025 Spending Review.

## **There isn't enough analytical capacity in some areas of the NCA's work**

The NCA has various analytical roles, including:

- strategic analysts, who examine information to inform priority setting and strategic planning;
- performance analysts, who analyse management information to assure the agency that it is achieving its objectives;
- technical analysts, who support developments in digital data and technology; and
- operational analysts, who work with intelligence and information to develop operations and support investigations.

We found that there was enough analytical capacity to make sure effective analysis underpinned strategic plans. One interviewee, who had been in their role for five years, told us that analytical capacity to support strategic planning was “in a better position than ever”.

However, we found that the agency didn't have enough capacity in some of its analytical functions. This shortfall was particularly evident in its intelligence command, where we have identified an [area for improvement](#). Interviewees told us that because there were no dedicated researchers, trained analysts often needed to carry out research tasks. This diverted them from applying their specialist skills and training to more complex analytical work. Interviewees also told us that some analysts spent too much time writing reports, rather than analysing data. They felt that this was a waste of analysts' skills.

Some interviewees also told us that not all analysts have the right skills and experience. We found that the limitations of the agency's IT systems, the lack of readily accessible management information and data, and the reliance on disparate spreadsheets all contributed to the lack of analytical capacity.

All of this affects how well the agency can bring together relevant information and analysis to inform planning and priority setting. For example, interviewees in one team told us that not having enough reliable data negatively affected the team's performance.

### **The agency is taking steps to recruit more analysts**

Interviewees told us that one of the reasons the NCA doesn't have enough analysts is because the pay isn't competitive. This reduces job appeal, which leads to fewer candidates applying to the agency.

The NCA is using an external organisation to recruit and train analytical staff before they start with the NCA. The external organisation employs the trainee analysts, but after 12 months, they can apply to the Civil Service for a permanent position.

### **The agency is good at managing corporate risks**

The NCA has a corporate risk register to manage the most critical risks it faces. It also has 35 intermediate risk registers at director or deputy director level. We reviewed them all.

In summary, we found that the NCA had a comprehensive understanding of its main organisational risks. In most cases, it had put appropriate mitigation in place. There is a strategic risk plan, which the audit risk and assurance committee oversees. Each risk has a management plan. The PAR team co-ordinates the understanding of risk across the agency. The agency regularly reviews risks, and it updates the NCA board and executive committee on corporate risks.

We found that the NCA was good at identifying and managing risks, but its financial limitations restricted how well it could mitigate them. The Government Internal Audit Agency reported a concern about this. In its 'National Crime Agency Annual opinion and report 2023/24', it said: "Financial pressures are delaying mitigation of corporate critical risks such as cyber security, technical debt, workforce and penetrating criminal communications."

### **A governance framework is in place for the Home Secretary and the ministerial team to carry out effective sponsorship of the agency**

An interviewee told us that every week, the NCA director general meets the Home Secretary and provides a written update. This is an opportunity for the NCA director general to brief the Home Secretary on performance and significant developments. This approach should also help the Home Secretary hold the agency to account for achieving its strategic aims.

The interviewee told us that at ministerial steering groups, government ministers also hold the agency to account. These groups focus on specific threats, such as OIC, firearms and drugs. The NCA told us it gives updates on its performance in relation to the specific threat. In [our subsection on arrangements for managing performance](#), we report on how an improved performance framework would help the Home Secretary assess the NCA's value for money.

### **The agency has an effective governance structure, which enables detailed oversight of organisational and operational development**

The NCA board is the agency's primary governance meeting. In 2022, the NCA director general commissioned a review of the agency's governance structure. One senior interviewee told us that the changes made after the review had improved the overall governance of the agency and had led to the board dealing with more strategic issues. The NCA also holds several other high-level governance meetings, including the executive committee and an agency-wide performance meeting.

During our inspection, we observed many NCA governance meetings, where we saw evidence of challenge, scrutiny and informed discussions. Attendance at these meetings was good, and attendees participated in open and meaningful discussions. However, in some other meetings, governance and challenge from senior leaders were sometimes less evident. In one meeting, this was because there were too many agenda items for the allotted time, and attendees needed more information for some items.

### **The agency is improving its processes for assessing and assuring the quality, accuracy and credibility of data, information and intelligence**

We found that the NCA had a problem with the accuracy of some data. One interviewee told us the IT limitations made it difficult for the agency to review, retain or delete data. They said the NCA's IT systems didn't support the agency in "doing the right thing" about data.

However, interviewees told us that the agency had a programme of digital transformation, which was beginning to have a positive effect. This involves the wider introduction of Microsoft functions, including Power BI and other applications. One interviewee described introducing and using Power BI as a "game changer".

The PAR team is developing Power BI dashboards to help officers share data more easily. The agency is also increasing its use of other Microsoft 365 features, which gives it greater analytical scope. This is positive, but the agency's inherent and fundamental problems with IT infrastructure will reduce the effectiveness of these functions.

## **The NCA's performance framework aligns to its strategic priorities**

The NCA has an effective performance framework, which gives it assurance that it is achieving its strategic priorities and objectives. We reviewed the performance framework (which the agency calls its outcomes framework), and we found that it clearly set out roles, responsibilities and accountabilities across the workforce. The performance framework aligns to the NCA's strategic priorities, and internal and external quality assurance help to make sure it is effective.

For each threat area, the framework identifies:

- the NCA and SOC system ambitions, such as high-impact disruptions;
- the agreed performance indicators; and
- targets.

The NCA has introduced an "objectives and key results" monitoring framework to help measure how it performs in relation to the NCA Strategy 2023–28. At the time of our inspection, this was still in its infancy. An interviewee described it as a more sophisticated way of measuring how the agency performs against its strategy. This should also help the Home Office hold the agency to account for its performance.

## **The agency sets performance indicators and targets through consultation with threat leads**

An interviewee told us that the NCA sets its performance targets by considering:

- the available funding;
- the resources it can allocate to each priority area; and
- the previous five years' performance data.

Each area of threat has a dedicated leader known as a threat lead. They propose performance measures and targets – for example, the number of disruptions – for their threat area. The agency's performance committee then considers each of the proposals, assessing whether they are ambitious enough and achievable.

The NCA then produces a paper for the Home Secretary. This sets out the performance levels it achieved last year and its future performance ambitions. At the end of each year, the agency presents to the Home Office an update on its annual performance.

In [our subsection on arrangements for managing performance](#), we report on the potential benefits of improving the agency's performance framework.

## **NCA leaders understand the agency's performance against its strategic priorities**

When we observed the NCA performance committee, it was clear that NCA leaders understood the agency's performance. This includes the work and targets of the various departments that report to the meeting. The agency told us that for the year ending 31 March 2025, it achieved its performance targets for disruptions. It said that this built on record performance in the previous year.

Interviewees told us that when the PAR team writes a report on performance, senior leaders ask how it relates to strategic priorities. This helps the NCA to focus clearly on priorities.

## **There are limitations in the agency's arrangements for managing performance**

We were generally satisfied with the way the NCA manages performance, but we did find some weaknesses. These are partly because of the complex way the NCA is funded, which we explain in [our chapter on managing finances](#).

A senior interviewee told us the NCA recognises that it is difficult to show what impact the agency has on SOC, and how that relates to its funding. The interviewee also said that the agency isn't in as strong a position as it would like to be. The NCA is taking steps to improve by recruiting economists and using consultancy support to show the impact it has on SOC.

An interviewee from the Home Office told us that although one of the NCA's aims is to reduce crime, the agency struggles to show how its activity (including disruptions) contributes to that aim. They said that the NCA's performance framework doesn't show the impact of its activity on the SOC threat level. The interviewee acknowledged that demonstrating the impact of the agency's performance is very difficult.

The interviewee also told us that the Home Office isn't always satisfied with the outcomes the NCA achieves, or by the agency's explanations for those outcomes. The performance framework focuses more on what the agency does (such as disrupting crime groups) than on what it achieves (such as reducing illegal immigration). The interviewee noted that this issue isn't unique to the NCA, and that it is prevalent in [regional organised crime units](#) and the broader SOC network.

The NCA told us that it was changing the way it reported performance. It said it was moving from measuring and reporting on the number of disruptions to measuring the broader, long-term effects of its work.

The NCA and the Home Office should work together to produce an improved performance framework. A more robust framework should help the NCA show its impact in tackling SOC. It should also help the Home Office hold the agency to account.

## **The agency's communications to tell the workforce about strategy and priorities are generally effective**

We found that in some teams, there was a good level of understanding of the NCA's strategic objectives. The agency has a one-page communications strategy, which outlines its strategic objectives. The agency also invites all officers to attend the NCA director general's online briefings. Some interviewees told us that the briefings reinforce the agency's messaging in relation to its strategy and priorities.

Many interviewees told us they understood the agency's strategy and priorities, and their role in helping the NCA address them. Interviewees also told us that the NCA had communicated effectively with officers about the planned move to a new headquarters in London.

However, some interviewees were less positive. Some officers told us they weren't clear about what the NCA's objectives were, or its strategic direction. An interviewee said: "I don't see how the work we do feeds into the senior leadership." Another said: "The strategy is well advertised. What's missing is the golden thread; how what you do on a day-to-day basis links into that."

A different interviewee told us that when the NCA had communicated with them about the Government's 2025 Spending Review, it hadn't given them clear information about the review's timescales and implications. Since our inspection, the NCA has told us that it has given its workforce updates about the review. This included publishing a detailed article on the NCA intranet, messages and blogs, and a timeline.

Due to the limitations of the agency's IT systems, leaders don't have enough information about how often officers view electronic communications. This means it is difficult for the agency to assess the effectiveness of its internal communications campaigns.

## **Many officers feel the NCA is overstretched and attempting to do too much**

In its 2023/24 year-end audit report, the Government Internal Audit Agency observed:

"Governance changes have improved strategic visibility over programme objectives, investment needs, capacity, delivery timescales and risks, with a better understanding of what cannot be undertaken."

However, many interviewees told us they felt that the NCA was overstretched and attempting to do too much. One senior interviewee told us there was a feeling that the agency moved from one priority to the next quite quickly. They told us that priorities change quickly – for example, from heroin to money laundering to small boat crossings. Another senior leader told us they felt that the NCA never says no to new work, even though it has limited money and officers.

Since our inspection, the NCA has given us examples of instances in which it has declined requests to take on more work. However, the agency accepts that it needs to address the perception that it never says no.

### **The agency identifies learning from reviews, but the learning isn't as accessible as it should be**

The NCA has a review team, which leaders can commission to examine operations, processes or any part of its functions. The operational standards, capability and assessment unit also carries out reviews and identifies lessons learned. The unit circulates lessons-learned documents to NCA officers.

However, interviewees told us that there is no single place where NCA officers can see what learning has been identified in the reviews. Interviewees told us that the review team had a spreadsheet, which only its members could access.

### **Senior leaders are generally visible and accessible to the agency's workforce**

Leaders' visibility plays an important role in building, developing and supporting the workforce. Good visibility also helps to foster a culture of integrity, compliance and inclusivity in the workplace. Effective leaders need to communicate with their officers and be accessible and visible. It is important they are seen to support the agency's values, set and maintain standards, and lead by example.

Many interviewees told us their senior leaders were visible and accessible to them. Some interviewees said that accessibility was improving because the agency had increased access to and use of the intranet. Other interviewees told us the agency was monitoring senior leadership visits to make sure leaders visited all directorates and branches.

Interviewees told us that senior leaders tried to be visible, and not just at the agency's main locations. The interviewees said the NCA director general wanted at least one director to visit each site at least twice a year. One interviewee told us that the NCA director general made sure he prioritised these visits, and that he aimed to do a site visit at least once a month. Other interviewees agreed that the senior leaders were visible. They said the visits gave senior officers opportunities to talk to teams.

We saw evidence of senior leaders communicating well with the workforce. They use video blogs, intranet messages, online question and answer sessions, and workforce-wide meetings to share information and hear from officers.

However, not all interviewees agreed that senior leaders were visible enough. We found that satisfaction about senior leaders' visibility varied between teams and locations. Some interviewees told us that they rarely saw senior leaders. One senior officer told us that the agency's financial constraints made it difficult for senior leaders to travel to all the NCA sites.

## **The agency needs to keep communicating to make sure everyone understands why priorities sometimes change**

Some interviewees told us that NCA senior leaders frequently change the agency's priorities, and that this was frustrating. The interviewees said the priorities often changed because of political pressures, and officers weren't sure what they should be focusing on from one month to the next.

One interviewee said this contributed to the agency being "bent out of shape". An interviewee also said that police reform and border security command were two emerging priorities that were leading the agency away from planned priorities.

Another interviewee told us they felt that the priority the NCA gave to reducing OIC wouldn't have come from the agency's own assessment of the main strategic threats.

A different interviewee disagreed. They told us that OIC was the right priority for the NCA. They said: "People dying in the channel should be prioritised." The NCA director general told us that the agency must adapt and be flexible so it can deal with new and evolving threats. We agree.

Senior leaders need to make sure officers are not only aware of the NCA's priorities, but that they understand the need for priorities to change as the agency adapts to new and emerging threats.

## **The NCA would benefit from producing an annual agency management statement**

In several parts of this report, we highlight important areas such as IT, finance and HR, in which the NCA needs to operate in a more co-ordinated way. For example, when we asked the agency for information about its staffing numbers, it struggled to give us all the data we requested. We concluded that the NCA didn't have the full range of data it needs.

In this report, we also highlight the NCA's need for a clearer operating model and a better understanding of its demand. All these areas affect the agency's overall performance.

Police forces in England and Wales produce annual [force management statements](#). These strategic tools align resources, capabilities and workforce with current and future demands. Although the NCA isn't a police force, it would benefit from adopting a similar approach. This would:

- give senior leaders a clearer view of priorities and interdependencies;
- support better decisions about resources; and
- help the agency clearly communicate its capabilities and constraints to the Government and other organisations it works with.

# Managing finances

## Requires improvement

The National Crime Agency (NCA) requires improvement at managing its finances, and at making sure it is effective and efficient.

In 2024/25, the NCA received around 80 percent of its funding directly from HM Treasury. Most of the remaining 20 percent comes from other government departments and from police forces. The external funding streams are ring-fenced for specific projects and capabilities. Under government counting rules, the NCA can't hold reserves, and it has to spend all its funding in the year it receives it.

The NCA is improving the way it uses its available funding to achieve its objectives. It is also improving the way it aligns its financial plans to priorities. However, the agency's ability to effectively plan and budget to meet its priorities is limited by:

- the lack of an effective operating model;
- ineffective financial monitoring and forecasting;
- the lack of a medium-term financial strategy; and
- complex external funding arrangements.

## Areas for improvement

### **The National Crime Agency should prioritise the review of its operating model**

An organisation's operating model sets out how it organises its processes, people, technology, performance and governance in order to achieve its priorities. An organisation should understand its current and future demand, so that it can inform its operating model and make changes where necessary.

The National Crime Agency (NCA)'s strategic workforce plan for 2025/26 acknowledges "the absence of an Agency Operating Model, which determines the proportionate resourcing required within various occupational groups".

In the NCA's risk register, in relation to the corporate risk of "failure to realise the benefits and objectives of the agency's investments", the agency recognises the importance of reviewing its operating model and acting on the outcomes. It also says: "The agency's operating model will be a critical enabler for how we deliver the agency's priorities." The risk register stated that the operating model review would take place in autumn 2025.

During our inspection, many interviewees told us that the operating model wasn't effective or clear, and that officers didn't understand it. Without a clear operating model, it is difficult for the agency to determine how many officers it needs, and what skills and training they need in order to achieve the agency's priorities. Interviewees from many teams told us they were under resourced, and that this was causing backlogs of work. However, senior officers told us the NCA regularly assesses and prioritises agency-wide demand.

The NCA told us it faces challenges in dealing with future demand. It said that reasons for this included the growing volume of online referrals from technology companies, and the changing nature of crime and new technology platforms. A senior officer said that "proactive demand is infinite".

Senior officers told us they had started a programme of work to review the agency's operating model in order to meet the ambitions set out in the NCA Strategy 2023–28. In November 2023, the agency produced a high-level design for its operating model. In December 2023, it slowed down the implementation of some elements of the model. Some interviewees told us this was because of lack of funding.

During our inspection, officers couldn't give us the data we needed to clearly understand the number of actual and required posts at the NCA, and the rationale for those numbers.

Not having a clear operating model – which sets out teams, grades and vacancies – has caused confusion and uncertainty in the workforce about the number of posts needed on each team. Many interviewees told us they felt that their team had a high number of vacancies. As the agency doesn't have a clear operating model, we couldn't assess whether those perceptions were correct.

After we had finished our fieldwork, the NCA produced its NCA Business Plan 2025–26. In the plan, the agency says it intends to: "implement the agency operating model by December 2025". This needs prioritising.

## **The National Crime Agency needs to improve its financial monitoring and forecasting**

In August 2024, the National Crime Agency (NCA) forecasted a £70 million overspend on its budget for the 2024/25 financial year. The agency put in place strict financial and workforce controls on overtime, using temporary staff, travel and subsistence, and it froze recruitment. This led to an actual underspend of £11.4 million.

During our inspection, officers gave us many examples of how these financial controls had a detrimental impact on morale, partnership working and how well they could carry out their roles.

In May 2024, an internal audit report by the Government Internal Audit Agency said: “There is still an expectation among some budget holders that an underspend will emerge later in the year.”

We found evidence that some officers still didn’t have confidence in the agency’s ability to manage budgets effectively, and that they had concerns about the accuracy of its financial forecasting.

The NCA knows about the difficulties and has taken some steps to rectify them, including:

- putting in place a financial strategy for 2025/26, which sets out how it will “protect and effectively manage the agency’s funding position ensuring the agency fulfils its objectives for 2025/26”;
- putting in place monthly financial assurance meetings with budget holders, where they can scrutinise and challenge financial forecasts;
- making sure financial oversight and assurance take place at the finance, investment and change committee, which provides regular updates to the executive committee and the NCA board;
- putting in place quarterly NCA director general accountability reviews of progress against delivery plans and financial targets; and
- issuing budget delegation letters to budget holders, setting out allocations, efficiencies and clear expectations for managing their 2025/26 budgets.

Reviewing lessons learned and improving the accuracy of financial forecasting should reduce the need for strict in-year financial controls. It should also help budget holders and other officers have more confidence in the financial forecasts.

## **The National Crime Agency should put in place and maintain a medium-term financial strategy, which covers a three to five year period**

At the time of our inspection, the National Crime Agency (NCA) set its budget and business plan annually. For the Government's 2025 Spending Review, the NCA produced a three-year efficiency plan. The plan covered the financial years 2026/27 to 2028/29 and totalled £119 million. The agency has set out governance arrangements for how it will manage and monitor these efficiencies. It has created an efficiency working group, which will report to the agency's finance, investment and change committee. The group will monitor progress against the efficiency plan.

However, the agency doesn't have a medium-term financial strategy (MTFS).

In 2021, a joint NCA and Home Office funding review steering group recommended: "The NCA should develop a five-year financial and business plan."

Without an MTFS, the agency can't balance meeting its priorities against available funding. The current arrangements limit how well the agency can make long-term plans and make informed decisions. It is also unclear whether the NCA's three-year efficiency plan will help the agency achieve a medium-term balanced budget, or whether it will need to make further savings.

After we had finished our fieldwork, the NCA produced its NCA Business Plan 2025–26, which includes the priority to "develop a multi-year financial business plan by [the] end of March 2026".

Developing a MTFS will help the NCA bring together all the known factors that affect its financial position and financial sustainability.

The MTFS should be as wide ranging as possible, including all the assets and liabilities on the agency's balance sheet. It will allow the NCA finance team to consider the financial implications of objectives and policies alongside constraints in resources. This should form the basis for decision-making.

A good MTFS will give the NCA a clear and concise view of future sustainability. It will also help clarify the decisions it needs to make in order to address any gaps in long-term financing.

It will help the agency link its ambitions and constraints and turn them into achievable options for the future.

## The National Crime Agency should work with the Home Office to change its external funding stream arrangements

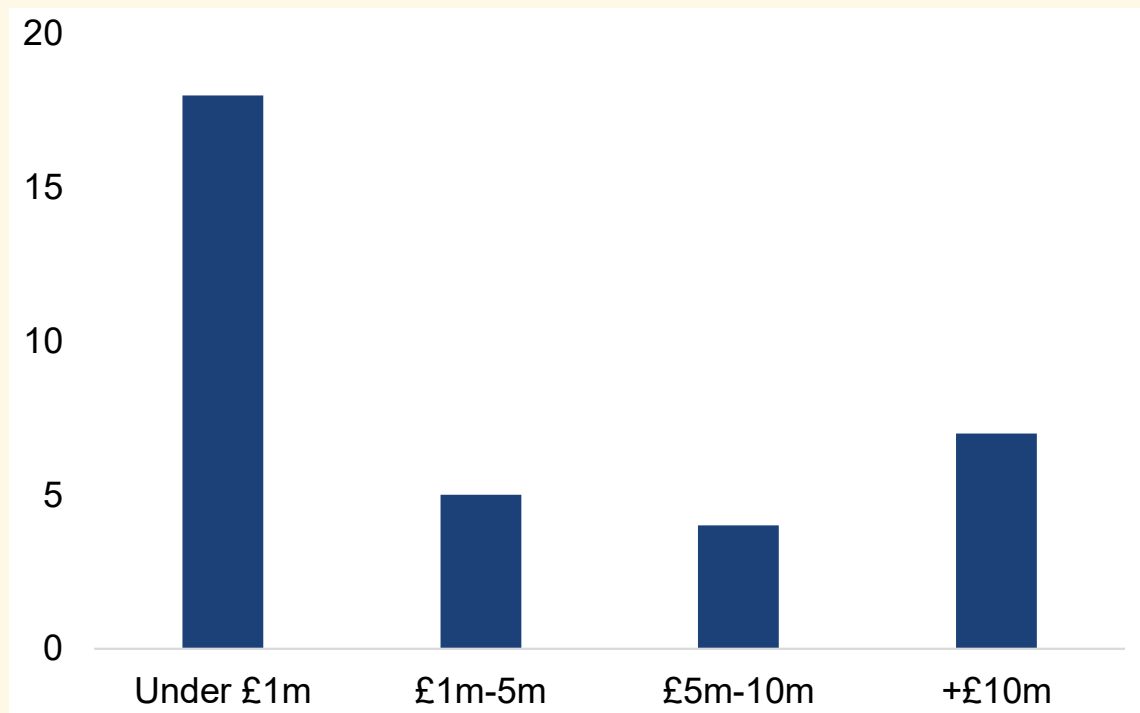
In the year ended 31 March 2025, the National Crime Agency (NCA) received ring-fenced funding from 34 external funding streams, which came from government departments in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This was to fund specific projects, and it amounted to 20 percent (about £210 million) of its total funding.

More than half of the external funding streams were for individual projects that cost under £1 million.

Of the external funding streams:

- 18 individually had a value of under £1 million and had a total value of £6 million;
- 5 individually had a total value of £1 million to £5 million and had a total value of £12 million;
- 4 individually had a total value of £5 million to £10 million and had a total value of £28 million; and
- 7 individually had a total value of more than £10 million and had a total value of £164 million.

**Figure 1: The number of agreed funding streams by value for the financial year ending 31 March 2025**



Source: NCA External Funding Summary 2024–25 Outturn

One of the funding streams, the economic crime levy – which had a value of £52 million – included funding for multiple programmes, each with separate monitoring requirements.

The agency has an agreement with each funding provider. This sets out funding, agreed outcomes, and bespoke monitoring and reporting requirements. Some agreements include termination arrangements by the funding provider, but we found no references to transitional arrangements for if funding stopped.

As funding mainly covers staffing costs, this is a financial risk for the agency, as it would still need to meet these costs if the funding stopped. A transitional arrangement should plan for that eventuality.

Agreements are usually set annually, even for recurring funding streams, and there is often a delay in finalising them.

In July 2025, after we had finished our fieldwork, the agency produced its NCA Business Plan 2025–26, which estimates that ring-fenced and external funding streams will increase to approximately 28 percent of total funding for that year. It also states that the agency is still waiting for confirmation of some external funding streams for 2025/26.

The NCA told us that meeting the requirements of all the agreements places a large administrative burden on the agency. It has estimated that this approach costs it £2 million per year.

This arrangement not only further limits how well the NCA can budget and plan to meet its priorities, but it leads to repeated uncertainty for up to 28 percent of the agency's funding.

## Main findings

### **The NCA's operating model allows it to move resources to meet new priorities and threats**

The NCA told us its flexible resourcing approach allows it to move resources to meet new threats, high demand, emerging priorities, and to make the most of external funding streams. The NCA calls this “surging” resources. In its NCA Business Plan 2025–26, the NCA planned to transfer 276 full-time equivalent officers to posts provided by external funding streams, including 157 to deal with organised immigration crime (OIC).

The agency also surged officers to tackle increasing demand in the [child sexual exploitation](#) referrals bureau (CSERB). The NCA told us that, in the past two years, the CSERB team has increased by 50 percent each year. However, the agency faces future financial challenges and other increasing demands, so this level of growth isn't sustainable.

### **Freezing recruitment and moving officers have had negative consequences**

As we reported in [our area for improvement relating to financial monitoring and forecasting](#), financial pressures on the NCA's 2024/25 budget led to it implementing a recruitment freeze during that year. Many officers told us that the recruitment freeze, together with moving officers to OIC and the CSERB, had led to workforce gaps in teams. They also said it had caused some officers to perceive operational backlogs, and that it had detrimentally affected morale.

Some interviewees told us their teams were operating at 50 percent below previous levels. One interviewee told us that the effect of this was that they were "receiving more work with less resource". Another said: "Workloads and priorities are untenable."

The NCA recognises the financial challenges it is facing, and it has reinforced the message to leaders that some recruitment controls need to remain. However, it has also recognised the negative effect that the recruitment freeze, together with the surge of officers to OIC and CSERB, has had on some teams. It has now taken steps to address it.

For the 2025/26 financial year, senior NCA officers told us they felt that the agency had set an affordable staffing budget, with total officer numbers agreed for each budget holder. It has prioritised recruitment in important areas such as investigations, which the NCA told us had been under resourced for the past three years. During our fieldwork, the agency told us it planned to recruit 130 officers to investigations, which includes an increase of 50 additional posts.

### **The agency wants to generate efficiencies by increasing its investment in artificial intelligence**

In [our chapter on understanding and prioritising the threat from serious and organised crime](#), we report on innovative practice relating to the way the NCA uses artificial intelligence (AI).

The NCA told us that as part of the Government's 2025 Spending Review, it submitted a request for AI investment funding. The agency estimated this would have generated £5.5 million in efficiencies per year and £42 million in projected productivity gains. However, the agency told us the Government didn't include this funding in the financial settlement for 2026/27.

## **The agency doesn't have a consistent way of identifying or recording the benefits from its transformation programmes**

When the NCA decides to invest in transformation, it is essential that it identifies and tracks the desired benefits as an essential part of the programme.

In February 2024, the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) audited the NCA's transformation portfolio programme and assessed whether it had realised the benefits for approved business cases. The GIAA identified "significant weaknesses in the framework of governance, risk management and control such that it could be or could become inadequate and ineffective".

During our inspection, officers told us that there wasn't a consistent approach to identifying or recording benefits from transformation programmes.

After we had finished our fieldwork, the NCA produced its NCA Business Plan 2025–26, which sets out a plan to "embed an agency benefits framework to draw a clearer link between our investment and operational outcomes by March 2026". This strategic intention needs to translate to an embedded and systematic approach throughout the agency.

## **The NCA collaborates to achieve financial efficiencies**

In [our chapter on leading a collaborative response to serious and organised crime](#), we report on the way the NCA leads, supports and co-ordinates a whole-system approach. The agency recognises that greater collaboration with external organisations can also bring about financial benefits.

During our inspection, interviewees gave us examples of corporate services teams, such as HR and legal services, working with partners such as government departments and the [Crown Prosecution Service](#) to improve efficiency. This work included holding joint conferences, building professional networks, sharing skills, and accessing and sharing good practice.

The agency is working with other law enforcement organisations on the Kitemaster technical development programme, the purpose of which is to address difficulties in recruiting people with specific technical skills. The programme is a two-year apprenticeship, and an internal cohort of agency officers is already in place. The NCA Business Plan 2025–26 sets out the agency's plan to further develop this programme with partner organisations. Benefits include securing skilled, experienced technical officers and reducing the costs of temporary staff.

We also found evidence of the NCA working with partners such as government departments and police forces to develop and secure one-off external funding opportunities. These included an additional £13 million of external funding from the Home Office in the 2024/25 financial year to support forensic costs and the agency's capital programme.

## **The NCA is improving the way its financial plans align investments with priorities**

The NCA carries out an annual business planning exercise, in which it sets priorities and budgets for the year. Some officers told us that there were problems with the agency's business planning for the 2024/25 financial year.

These problems included:

- not issuing budget allocations to budget holders until July 2024 (four months after the financial year had started);
- “over-programming” investments (allocating more funding than what was available);
- that some budgets, such as forensics, were insufficient; and
- that the agency didn't have confidence in the accuracy of its officer pay costs.

These problems contributed to a forecast overspend, which meant the agency had to put in place strict financial and workforce controls throughout the year.

The NCA told us it has learned from these problems, and that it has made improvements in the 2025/26 business planning. When we reviewed documents and carried out interviews, we found that the NCA felt that it had set an affordable business plan for 2025/26, which includes some investment. It had also issued its budget allocations earlier in the financial year.

The business planning process also included independent scrutiny and challenge from a non-executive director. Interviewees told us this had been effective.

The NCA told us it had assessed investment requests for 2025/26 against agreed criteria. It said it had prioritised requests for investment in IT transformation, and that it would only invest the minimum needed to maintain out-of-date legacy systems.

Some of the IT investment requests that the agency plans to take forward include:

- digital case and intelligence management transformation;
- international crime case management;
- HR and finance systems;
- transforming digital ways of working for official and secret material; and
- a [child sexual abuse](#) investigations transformation programme.

The NCA told us that when these investments are put in place, they would mitigate risks in the corporate risk register, develop capabilities, and improve efficiency and productivity.

The NCA Business Plan 2025–26 clearly sets out priorities, funding, officer numbers, objectives and key results. It includes a delivery plan for each directorate, which the agency intends to monitor throughout the year.

The NCA has made improvements to its business planning process for 2025/26. However, during our inspection, interviewees told us the agency needs to do more in this area.

Starting the business planning process earlier and issuing budget delegations before the start of the financial year would help the agency meet its priorities more effectively.

### **The NCA is improving the way it uses its available funding to achieve its objectives efficiently**

The NCA received a clear, unqualified opinion from the Comptroller and Auditor General for its 2024/25 statement of accounts. This means that in the auditor’s opinion, the agency’s financial statements give a true and fair view of its affairs as of 31 March 2025. It also means that the financial statements have been properly prepared in accordance with accounting and HM Treasury requirements.

The NCA board, executive committee and finance, investment and change committee receive regular financial updates from the agency’s chief finance officer. We observed some of these meetings and reviewed minutes from others. We saw evidence that there was effective scrutiny and challenge of the financial updates.

[HM Treasury ‘Consolidated budgeting guidance 2025–26’](#) states that “departments are expected to manage new pressures within their existing budgets”. It also says: “Departments are therefore expected to have a robust approach to contingency.” This approach would include a decision to not fully allocate the budget at the start of the year, and to hold some back to deal with unforeseen emerging pressures.

As the NCA doesn’t have a contingency, its ability to meet unforeseen or in-year pressures is limited. Not having a contingency also limits how well the agency can take advantage of unplanned opportunities or investments.

The agency has recognised this, and in its 2025/26 financial strategy, it sets out the arrangements for establishing a contingency if it identifies additional efficiencies. The agency calls this contingency an “in-year reserve”. It also outlines a three-stage approach for budget holders to follow when dealing with unexpected financial pressures that arise in the year.

### **An unsatisfactory procurement audit has led to improvements in procurement processes**

In February 2025, the GIAA carried out an internal audit review on contract management, and it assessed the agency’s arrangements as “unsatisfactory”. The NCA has already taken some steps to improve this, and it is using the internal audit report findings as an action plan.

The steps include:

- recruiting additional officers to the commercial team;
- improving the way it governs contracts;
- establishing a procurement efficiency register;
- refining procurement processes; and
- providing procurement training to officers.

The NCA is starting to achieve better value for money from procurement. For example, as part of a review of digital, data and technology procurement, the agency broke down one contract, which was previously with one supplier, into smaller contracts. This has brought about efficiency savings of £12 million and avoided an over-reliance on one supplier.

The agency also told us that moving the cryptocurrency track-and-trace contract to three years, rather than annual, has led to £3.6 million in savings over the three-year period.

### **The NCA has experienced difficulties in managing officer pay budgets**

In the 2024/25 financial year, the NCA forecast a £20 million pay overspend, which contributed to its overall difficult financial position. At the time of our inspection, the agency managed officer pay budgets centrally, rather than devolving them to directors as budget holders. In its 2025/26 financial strategy, the NCA states: “As staff costs have been centrally managed, Directorates have lacked transparency of the financial pressures and have needed to implement savings measures and spending restrictions to absorb the overspend.”

For the 2025/26 financial year, the agency has put in place arrangements that will give directors information about officer pay budgets. This will allow directors to see how much officers cost, and to have an understanding of how these budgets work. The NCA Business Plan 2025–26 includes a plan to implement pay delegation arrangements to directors by March 2026.

The agency’s strategic workforce plan highlights an over-reliance on temporary labour, particularly for digital and commercial roles. The agency has calculated that the average cost of a temporary officer is £150,000 per year, compared with £67,000 for the average cost of a permanent officer.

In the 2024/25 financial year, temporary labour and consultancy cost the agency about £30 million in its core budget. There was also a high level of spending on temporary officers and consultancy to meet priorities funded by external funding streams.

For the 2025/26 financial year, the agency needs to make £32 million of savings to balance the budget. It has identified where the efficiency savings will come from, and it has removed them from departmental budgets. One of the efficiencies identified is to reduce the reliance on temporary officers by £4 million.

# Building, developing and supporting the workforce

## Requires improvement

The National Crime Agency (NCA) requires improvement at building, developing and supporting its workforce, and at fostering a culture of integrity, compliance and inclusivity in the workplace.

Through a complex command structure, the agency leads the national response to [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#). Each command is made up of multiple teams and disciplines, located across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The agency also deploys international liaison officers to support its global operations.

The agency's HR directorate plays a critical role in enabling the agency to achieve its priorities. However, during our inspection, we found that several factors limited how well HR could operate. These factors hinder the agency's ability to build, support, develop and retain a highly skilled workforce.

The agency is trying to understand and improve workforce culture, but it needs to do more to address bullying, [harassment](#), victimisation and discrimination. It also needs to improve the way it deals with grievances and allegations of [misconduct](#).

## Areas for improvement

### **The National Crime Agency should develop its strategic workforce planning approach**

Effective strategic workforce planning helps an organisation succession plan, forecast its workforce demand, and make sure it has the right people, with the right skills, to meet current and future demand.

At the time of our inspection, the National Crime Agency (NCA) had an establishment of approximately 5,950 officers, including permanent, seconded and temporary personnel. It faced significant workforce problems, which affected its ability to retain skilled officers, attract talent and meet operational priorities. These problems were made worse by outdated IT systems, not enough management information, and disparities in employment terms and conditions.

In 2022, the agency produced its 2022–25 people strategy. This included five work strands that the agency had assessed as being crucial to its ability “to respond to an evolving strategic landscape”. Strategic workforce planning was one of these.

In 2024, the [Government Internal Audit Agency](#) reported that the NCA’s workforce planning was immature, and that it didn’t proactively support the link between business planning and recruitment.

The NCA has also recognised the shortcomings in its strategic workforce planning. In 2025, it reported: “The agency exhibits many of the classic resource pressure symptoms synonymous with poorly integrated workforce planning.”

We found that not having cohesive strategic workforce planning contributed to:

- a lack of central oversight of the skills the agency’s workforce has and needs;
- ineffective succession planning;
- inefficient, unco-ordinated recruitment;
- reliance on temporary labour, consultancy and temporary promotion; and
- perceptions of excessive workloads in several units.

In June 2025, the agency produced its strategic workforce plan for 2025/26. We reviewed the plan and found that it set out the agency’s ambitions to improve. It included 24 actions, but it didn’t have enough detail about how it will effectively carry them out.

### **The National Crime Agency should develop accurate, timely and accessible HR management information to support its HR functions and workforce planning**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) doesn’t have the timely, accessible management information it needs to support its HR functions and workforce planning. This is primarily because it doesn’t have an effective and integrated HR IT system. The NCA’s main HR IT system is outdated, and the agency doesn’t use it to its full potential.

The agency doesn't store all its workforce data on the HR IT system, and officers use spreadsheets to store and analyse data, including recruitment and training records. These manual processes are highly inefficient. They also increase the risk of the agency having inaccurate data as a result of human error. Many interviewees told us that out-of-date HR and finance systems continue to hinder the NCA's work.

This disjointed approach to storing and using HR management information means the agency can't always access timely data.

This limits its ability to:

- deploy officers to roles or locations where they are most needed;
- fully understand where it has allocated its resources;
- assess workforce diversity; and
- allow HR to respond to requests for support, or proactively identify and address trends, such as sickness absence.

The NCA has acknowledged the limitations of its HR IT systems. It has commissioned a project to identify and implement a new enterprise resource planning system. This would improve HR data management, and it would better align HR and finance functions. The agency aims to introduce the new system by 2027, but it accepts that it may not be fully implemented until 2030.

To help the NCA realise the benefits of improved HR data management, it should make sure:

- the new system is fully integrated with the agency's other operating systems; and
- it trains officers to use it effectively.

## Main findings

### **The NCA doesn't fully understand its skills gaps or training needs, and it doesn't have comprehensive training records**

The agency doesn't have a comprehensive understanding of the workforce skills it has, those it needs and where skills gaps exist. Without this insight, it hasn't been able to carry out an organisational training needs analysis. It also hasn't been able to address the skills gaps to help it meet its current and future demand.

We found that the operational standards, capability and assessment unit keeps up-to-date records for some accredited training, including the [professionalising investigations programme](#), the [intelligence professionalisation programme](#), and surveillance and firearms qualifications. However, the agency's learning, development and training unit can't produce a complete record of all officers' training. This is because:

- the agency doesn't have a robust HR IT system;
- officers use several systems and spreadsheets; and
- the local units maintain their own records without sharing them centrally.

The NCA plans to introduce a learning management system to centralise training records, but this depends on the rollout of Microsoft Office 365. At the time of our inspection, it also intended to set up a learning academy later in 2025. This would co-ordinate training across operational and support functions, and it could improve the oversight and consistency of training. When linked to a strategic workforce plan, it could also help the agency achieve its ambition of growing a highly skilled workforce.

In the meantime, the lack of an agency-wide training needs analysis and robust training records have resulted in a disparity in training. Only 45 percent of NCA respondents to the 2024 people survey felt that they could access the right learning and development opportunities when they needed to. This was considerably lower than the Civil Service average of 68 percent. During our inspection, officers in some units told us they received good training, but this wasn't the case across the whole agency.

We found several examples of officers in similar roles across different commands not receiving the same training. Several senior managers told us this had led to some officers applying for roles in other units so they could access the training they felt they needed. This inconsistency risks undermining operational effectiveness and reducing workforce confidence in the agency's commitment to professional development.

In our chapters on [understanding and prioritising the threat from SOC](#) and [investigating SOC](#), we report on the training the agency gives intelligence and investigation officers.

### **The NCA tries to understand and improve its workforce culture**

The NCA's senior leaders have taken steps to better understand the agency's culture, and they are committed to improving it. We found that the executive committee had increased its focus on cultural issues, particularly those highlighted in the annual people surveys. In response to concerns raised in the surveys, the agency commissioned targeted reviews in specific commands to examine the underlying causes of poor workplace culture.

The agency used insights from the surveys and internal reviews to develop structured processes for change. It prioritised six “cultural shifts”:

- collaboration
- recognition
- innovation
- empowerment
- diversity
- identity.

It has developed plans for each of these cultural shifts, with defined measures for success. It has also appointed a senior manager as head of culture and engagement, and the culture change steering group oversees progress. The group is chaired by the deputy director of HR, and it is attended by senior managers and leaders. These include the head of culture and engagement, the head of diversity and inclusion, and representatives from across the agency, including HR. The group uses a performance dashboard to monitor progress, and it provides strategic direction for cultural improvement.

Every two months, the agency sends pulse surveys – short, focused questionnaires – to a sample of employees to find out how they feel about specific cultural issues. It uses the results to track its progress in achieving its cultural shifts and to better understand workforce culture. Several commands have also set up cultural initiatives, with at least one producing a formal cultural plan. These local efforts complement the agency-wide approach.

We welcome these developments and look forward to seeing their impact.

### **The NCA has introduced an ethical framework to improve standards and organisational culture**

In 2024, the NCA introduced a new set of values: integrity, agility, alliance and excellence. More than 1,000 officers contributed to the consultation process the agency used to develop these values.

The agency has also introduced standards of professional behaviour that reflect those used by Home Office police forces, and it has adopted the [College of Policing’s ethical policing principles](#). The NCA is working on combining these elements into its own code of ethics, which will set expectations for conduct across the agency.

Officers are also bound by the [Civil Service code](#). This framework is designed to promote consistency, accountability and ethical decision-making.

Senior leaders have communicated the NCA’s values and standards of behaviour to the workforce through several channels, including video blogs and face-to-face

briefings. The agency has used the home page of its intranet to promote the values, with weekly communications that focus on one value at a time.

The NCA also uses training to reinforce values and standards of behaviour. The induction programme includes interactive sessions on the agency's values and standards. This includes a session from the agency's professional standards unit. The agency has also introduced mandatory in-person allyship training, which covers inappropriate behaviour, and annual e-learning about Civil Service expectations and standards of behaviour. Interviewees told us that officers who fail to complete the annual training become ineligible for performance-related rewards.

As part of its management development programme, the agency trains officers in how to challenge inappropriate behaviour, promote a positive culture and hold difficult conversations. This is intended to help managers support the agency's positive culture.

We found that the agency had been largely successful in raising awareness of its values and standards. The results of the 2024 people survey showed that 92 percent of NCA respondents were familiar with the agency's values. This was eight percentage points higher than the Civil Service average. These results align with the feedback we heard in our interviews and focus groups, which suggested that internal messaging has been effective.

**Most officers said they could identify and report inappropriate behaviour, but the agency needs to make sure all officers feel confident and supported**

The NCA has introduced a confidential reporting line. It has also produced guidance on how to report inappropriate behaviour. These measures should help officers know how to report such behaviour.

The results of the 2024 people survey showed that 75 percent of NCA respondents felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour. This was four percentage points higher than the Civil Service average. Most interviewees we spoke to said they would feel confident reporting concerns, and that they believed the agency would support them. However, the survey showed a gender disparity. Only 72 percent of female NCA respondents felt able to challenge inappropriate behaviour, compared with 82 percent of male respondents.

Some managers told us they found it difficult to identify inappropriate behaviour because their teams were located in different parts of the country.

These findings highlight the need for continued support and training to help leaders recognise and respond to concerns, particularly in remote or hybrid working environments.

Although the agency has made progress, more work is needed to make sure all officers – regardless of grade, gender or working location – feel confident and supported to report inappropriate behaviour.

## **The NCA has taken steps to reduce bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination, but it needs to do more to eradicate it**

The NCA has carried out a range of initiatives to tackle bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination (BHVD). When we reviewed agency documents and carried out interviews with officers, we found that it had:

- introduced training “to enable an inclusive culture with zero tolerance for bullying”;
- included BHVD-related content in induction training, mandatory annual e-learning and the management development programme;
- produced policy and guidance that outlines its approach to BHVD;
- investigated officers accused of being involved in BHVD and disciplined them when it had deemed it appropriate; and
- made well-being support available to [victims](#) of BHVD.

Despite these efforts, several officers told us that repeated workforce surveys showed that BHVD was an ongoing problem for the NCA. This was reflected in the results of the 2024 people survey, which showed that:

- 11 percent of NCA respondents said that they had been discriminated against while working in the agency in the past 12 months, which was higher than the Civil Service average of 7 percent; and
- 10 percent of NCA respondents said that they had been bullied or harassed while working in the agency in the past 12 months, which was higher than the Civil Service average of 8 percent.

Of the NCA respondents who said they had been bullied or harassed, 44 percent said that they had reported it. This was better than the Civil Service average of 40 percent for comparable respondents. Of these NCA respondents, 49 percent felt that they had been punished for reporting the incident, which was higher than the Civil Service average of 32 percent for comparable respondents. This indicates that although reporting processes exist in the NCA, officers may not trust them. This undermines the agency’s efforts to foster a culture of accountability.

The NCA has acknowledged the scale of the challenge in addressing BHVD, and it recognises that it needs to improve the way the workforce perceives its efforts to tackle it. In its analysis of the 2024 people survey results, the agency said that the survey “suggests that bullying, harassment and discrimination (BHD) is a significant issue within the NCA, and there is a need for cultural change, accountability, and robust processes to address these problems effectively”. It highlighted a series of specific problems that the agency faces, including:

“There is a perception that BHD exist within the NCA, and staff feel that reporting such behaviour does not lead to appropriate action being taken against the perpetrators, particularly if they are in senior positions.”

“The culture within the NCA seems to enable and perpetuate BHD, with staff feeling afraid to challenge poor behaviour due to fear of repercussions or a lack of confidence that their concerns will be addressed.”

“The hierarchical structure and power dynamics within the NCA enable BHD, with staff feeling that senior managers are not held accountable for their behaviour towards subordinates.”

During our inspection, we found that some officers shared these views.

Our findings and the results of the people survey suggest that the agency’s approach isn’t effective enough at tackling BHVD. Although the NCA has policies and training in place, they haven’t yet translated into a culture in which officers feel safe to report concerns or are confident that the agency will act. The NCA should take more robust and visible steps to build trust.

Toward the end of our inspection, the NCA gave us a draft workforce BHVD strategy. We welcome the agency’s recognition that it needs an effective strategy to address BHVD. However, when we reviewed this draft strategy, we found that it didn’t contain enough actions to adequately address the problems the agency faces.

### **The NCA needs to improve the way it deals with grievances**

An internal grievance casework team manages grievances and offers advice. However, investigations related to grievances are carried out by NCA officers in addition to their normal role.

Of the 30 grievance files we reviewed, 13 took longer to investigate and conclude than the agency’s own grievance policy timescales. In some cases, this was because of problems in finding appropriate investigating managers and decision-makers.

In 17 of the grievance files we reviewed, we found that the case records didn’t include relevant emails, letters, terms of reference or minutes of meetings.

When appropriate, the grievance casework team should identify areas in which the agency can improve, and it should make recommendations for [organisational learning](#). The NCA doesn’t hold a central register of recommendations made or actions it has taken in response to grievance investigations. It should make sure it takes account of learning and recommendations that follow grievance investigations.

However, in the cases we reviewed, we were pleased to find that the agency sent letters to all officers who raised a grievance, advising them of the available well-being support.

## **The NCA is taking steps to improve the way it deals with allegations of misconduct**

The NCA's professional standards unit (PSU) investigates the most serious allegations of misconduct against members of the agency's officers. Line managers should deal with lower-level allegations that only need management intervention.

We examined a [dip sample](#) of PSU investigation files, and we found that the standard of investigations wasn't consistent. We found examples of investigators:

- not routinely using investigation plans;
- not always recording the rationale for decisions;
- sometimes downplaying the seriousness of allegations;
- not always investigating relevant allegations as crimes; and
- not always responding appropriately to allegations of sexual offences or [domestic abuse](#).

We found that many investigations took too long, with little rationale recorded for delays. There was also little evidence recorded of supervisory oversight of the investigations.

When the NCA was established in 2013, its conduct regulations were set out in secondary legislation. They are based on the police conduct regulations, but they weren't updated in 2020, when the police conduct regulations were updated. The agency is working with the Home Office to rectify that. At the time of our inspection, the NCA was also considering new vetting regulations, and how they apply to the agency.

Legislation doesn't allow the NCA to place dismissed officers on the [College of Policing](#) barred list. Instead, the agency puts information about dismissed officers on the [Police National Database](#). However, if the database isn't accurate, hasn't been updated or isn't checked, there is a risk to other law enforcement agencies and the public. The Crime and Policing Bill contains provisions for the NCA to place its officers on the barred list.

During our inspection, we told the NCA about the problems we found in the way it investigated misconduct allegations. We were pleased to see the agency make immediate changes, which should lead to improvements.

## **The agency should improve its performance development system to support effective succession planning and develop a capable workforce**

The NCA's performance development system (PDS) should identify people's development needs and support career progression. It should also recognise and reinforce positive performance, and help to improve job satisfaction, motivation and officer retention.

Under the agency's PDS operating procedure, senior managers should carry out mid-year and end-of-year performance reviews for all officers. We found that managers weren't consistently carrying out end-of-year performance reviews. The agency told us that in the year ending 31 March 2025, 603 officers didn't receive a PDS performance rating. This is approximately 11 percent of the workforce.

The results of the 2024 people survey also showed that 18 percent of NCA respondents disagreed with the statement: "I receive regular feedback on my performance." Although performance feedback and the PDS process are distinct, the similarity in these figures suggests a wider problem in relation to how the agency manages and supports performance. Better performance management will support officer development and succession planning.

During our inspection, we found that some parts of the agency followed the PDS procedure more closely than others. In some units, most or all officers appeared to have had an end-of-year performance review within the past 12 months. However, in some other teams, officers told us they hadn't received one for several years.

Senior leaders and officers across the agency told us that the PDS doesn't result in development opportunities or training. They also said that the agency doesn't use PDS outcomes to inform promotion or appointment decisions. As a result, many officers told us they didn't value the process. Some described it as "adding little value", being a "waste of time" or "pointless". One senior leader echoed these sentiments, stating that it "doesn't add any value and is ineffective".

### **The agency has taken steps to improve its recruitment processes**

During our inspection, many officers told us that the NCA's recruitment process was too slow. We heard that the agency's communication with candidates was poor, and that many candidates accepted employment elsewhere while waiting for a start date.

In 2024, the [Government Internal Audit Agency \(GIAA\)](#) reviewed the NCA's recruitment arrangements. It identified barriers that prevented the agency from recruiting officers in line with its headcount requirements and within necessary timescales. This posed a risk to operational capacity. The GIAA also found that workforce planning was underdeveloped and didn't effectively link business planning with recruitment activity. As a result, the agency struggled to maintain a consistent and proactive recruitment pipeline.

The GIAA also found that the NCA didn't have consistent, reliable management information about resourcing and recruitment. The available data often failed to provide a clear and timely overview of recruitment activity. As a result, the agency couldn't effectively monitor progress, identify gaps, or make informed decisions to support workforce planning.

During our inspection, we found that at each stage of the recruitment process, HR officers relied on manually updated spreadsheets. The NCA has recognised that it needs to make improvements to its recruitment process, and it has included this in its business plans and risk register. The agency has also appointed a deputy director to oversee recruitment improvement, and it has developed a recruitment strategy.

The NCA's 2025/26 business plan includes a target to reduce the time it takes to hire new officers. During our inspection, the agency introduced an applicant tracking system to make its recruitment processes more efficient. The system should also allow the recruitment team to give more timely updates to candidates. This would help to address concerns about poor communication and candidate dropout.

We found that the NCA's vetting requirements contribute to the length of time it takes for successful candidates to start employment. Due to the nature of its work, the agency needs to vet much of its workforce to a high standard. The agency's recruitment strategy includes targets to reduce vetting times. We interviewed members of the vetting team, and we saw that it had produced a plan to improve its efficiency.

Some senior leaders told us that the NCA used to make recruitment decisions without central co-ordination. This had resulted in some teams over-recruiting, while others, such as data and digital teams, struggled to fill critical vacancies. The agency has introduced a central panel that is responsible for making recruitment decisions. This could improve the way the agency co-ordinates and prioritises recruitment.

### **Attrition is relatively low, but the NCA doesn't have a good understanding of the reasons why officers leave**

The NCA hasn't developed a good understanding of why officers leave. Its performance dashboard records high-level categories, such as resignation and retirement, but it doesn't record the underlying reasons for voluntary departures. Without this insight, the agency can't assess the scale or nature of the problem.

Since 2022, the NCA has increasingly recognised the importance of understanding why officers leave or choose to stay. In 2024, it introduced exit interviews for departing officers, and it piloted [stay interviews](#) for people who were considering leaving or who worked in highly skilled, hard-to-recruit roles.

By analysing the results of these interviews, the agency should gain valuable insight into why people leave and what motivates others to stay. Organisations can use this type of information to make targeted retention strategies and improve workforce satisfaction. However, at the time of our inspection, the agency didn't analyse the interview results. As a result, it hadn't used the findings to inform its approach to retention.

## **The NCA aspires to improve the diversity of its workforce**

We found that the NCA had targets to increase the diversity of its workforce. By the year 2030, it aims to better reflect the communities it serves. Different perspectives and experience can increase innovation and improve decision-making and organisational performance. However, at the time of our inspection, the agency didn't hold comprehensive information about the proportion of its workforce who had one or more of the nine [protected characteristics](#).

The agency has recognised this gap. It told us that in 2024/25, it ran a campaign to encourage officers to declare their diversity data to HR. The communications team publicised this on the NCA intranet site. The agency told us it was planning to run further campaigns in the future.

HR told us that the agency only had workforce diversity targets relating to four of the nine protected characteristics, as these were the only ones for which it held workforce data. At the time of our inspection, the agency wasn't on track to achieve these targets. However, some officers told us that the agency had set these targets before the recruitment freeze started, and that they had become unachievable.

According to the minutes of the NCA's May 2025 people committee meeting, the agency was planning to update its diversity targets "in due course". The minutes also state that the agency was exploring an interim shift in focus towards "bringing on officers currently employed to improve representation and officer experience, while the recruitment freeze continued to prevent the agency from 'bringing in' diversity".

At the time of our inspection, the NCA's HR system also limited the agency's ability to compare workforce diversity data with population demographics. For example, it only recorded binary gender options, and it recorded the number of officers who identified as LGB, rather than recording broader LGBTQ+ identities.

## **The NCA prioritises workforce well-being**

In 2024, the NCA introduced a workforce health, safety and well-being strategy. The strategy defines the agency's well-being priorities, sets cultural expectations and establishes measures to assess effectiveness. We found that the strategy was comprehensive and included both physical and psychological well-being.

The agency has governance structures for putting the strategy into effect. A senior leader chairs a health and well-being committee, which reports to the people committee and the executive committee. It has also commissioned comprehensive reviews into specific well-being issues, so it can identify potential risks and help to improve well-being.

Senior leaders, including the NCA director general, actively promote well-being through online events, which shows their commitment to workforce welfare. The agency has also appointed well-being champions and trained mental-health first aiders to support its officers.

Many officers told us that excessive workloads harmed their mental health and well-being. The results of the 2024 people survey reflected this: only 58 percent of NCA respondents said that they had an acceptable workload. This is eight percentage points below the Civil Service average. A further 25 percent of NCA respondents said their workload was unacceptable. During our inspection, officers in many teams told us their work had increased to an unmanageable level.

These findings show that although the NCA prioritises well-being, the demand it puts on its officers undermines this. It weakens the impact of its well-being strategy and limits progress towards a healthier and more sustainable workforce.

### **Perceptions of well-being support vary across the agency**

During the inspection, many officers told us that the agency takes their well-being seriously and provides good well-being support. However, we also received feedback from officers who felt that the agency didn't adequately manage their well-being. This reflected the results of the 2024 people survey, in which 50 percent of NCA respondents agreed that the agency: "provides good support for employee health, well-being and resilience".

In the 2024 people survey, 46 percent of NCA respondents reported regularly discussing personal well-being or work-related stress with their manager. This is 14 percentage points below the Civil Service average. Senior HR leaders acknowledged this disparity. They told us they were trying to improve line managers' knowledge and capacity to support the well-being of their officers. Doing so would help the agency establish a consistent and proactive approach to well-being across the entire workforce.

### **The agency offers psychological evaluations to officers in certain roles**

The agency tries to tailor well-being support for individual officers. It uses a range of risk matrices to determine what well-being support is suitable, and it tells officers how to access support from the agency and external organisations. This structured approach should help make sure many officers in high-risk roles receive the psychological support they need.

In 2024, the NCA commissioned the GIAA to review its clinical support services. The review highlighted several problems, including that the agency didn't have enough psychological support provision to respond to an increase in referrals. The review also found that the NCA relied on temporarily employed qualified practitioners to provide this service. In response, the agency approved the recruitment of more psychological support practitioners. We welcome this, as it should strengthen the clinical services team's capacity and capability to respond to referrals. It should also help the agency give its officers timely and effective psychological support.

However, at the time of our inspection, the recruitment process was ongoing and the agency was continuing to use temporary practitioners. To avoid resourcing shortfalls in future, the NCA is identifying qualified practitioners who could join the agency quickly, which would reduce the time it takes to recruit.

Every two years, the NCA assesses the specific psychological risks inherent in all roles in the agency. It uses these assessments to decide which post holders are eligible for regular psychological evaluations. For example, eligible posts include officers working in some [safeguarding](#) roles.

The agency encourages officers in these posts to have evaluations, but it doesn't mandate them. We found that the agency was trying to increase the number of evaluations, and it was considering making them mandatory. We know that discussions are ongoing across wider UK law enforcement agencies about whether these evaluations should be mandatory. In the meantime, the NCA is asking line managers to encourage officers to attend the evaluations, and to access support when they need it.

# Understanding and prioritising the threat from serious and organised crime

## Adequate

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is adequate at understanding and prioritising the threat from [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#).

The [Crime and Courts Act 2013](#) states that the NCA has the function of gathering, storing, processing, analysing and disseminating [intelligence](#). It carries out this function through its intelligence command, which includes more than 120 teams across the UK and a network of officers based overseas.

The NCA is generally effective at gathering and disseminating intelligence. We saw examples of strong intelligence processing and analysis across several parts of the agency. However, there are some shortcomings that limit its effectiveness and efficiency.

The agency doesn't have an overarching intelligence system that allows it to understand the full scope of the intelligence it holds. This undermines its strategic capability, creates inefficiencies and increases the risk of failing to meet its [disclosure](#) responsibilities under the [Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996](#).

The intelligence command's limited staffing means it can't always manage intelligence effectively. In particular, there is a shortage of intelligence analysts.

## Areas for improvement

### **The National Crime Agency should make sure all officers record non-sensitive intelligence on one IT system**

National Crime Agency (NCA) policy requires officers to input all non-sensitive intelligence on to ATLAS, the agency's central [intelligence](#) repository. However, this doesn't happen consistently. Although a substantial amount of intelligence is stored on ATLAS, other intelligence is stored on unconnected systems, local drives and spreadsheets. The agency doesn't have a tool that allows officers to search across all these disparate systems.

We found several examples of this, including:

- Some officers in the Joint International Crime Centre didn't know what intelligence to copy from their local database (SIENA) to ATLAS, and they weren't routinely doing so.
- The agency facilitation team didn't have a process to make sure recipients in other NCA units uploaded its intelligence reports to ATLAS.

This presents the NCA with several risks.

It affects the agency's National Assessment Centre by limiting its access to all relevant intelligence. This reduces the breadth and quality of its assessments, which may not reflect the full intelligence picture.

It increases the risk of officers not assessing or disseminating intelligence effectively. Officers record information across multiple systems, so analysts may miss links between seemingly unrelated pieces of intelligence. The agency may then fail to identify threats and to act promptly to address them.

This fragmented intelligence structure also presents a risk to the agency's ability to meet its [disclosure](#) obligations under the [Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996](#). (See [our subsection on improving compliance with disclosure obligations](#).)

The agency also risks failing to share intelligence with domestic and international agencies in a timely and complete way. This could undermine joint operations and damage trust.

### **The National Crime Agency should increase its intelligence analysis capacity**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) doesn't have enough analysts to make full use of the [intelligence](#) it receives. One senior leader told us: "We get amazing intelligence, great sources, but not enough analysts. To do the agency's intelligence justice, we would need bigger analyst teams."

We found that some high-profile investigations received strong analytical support, but this wasn't consistent. Officers told us that regional intelligence teams used to include analysts, but the NCA had centralised these roles. One regional intelligence team senior officer told us that most investigations in their region had no analytical support.

We found that some centralised teams responsible for giving analytical support didn't have enough analysts to meet demand. This meant many investigations and intelligence operations took place without any analytical support.

In [our subsection on analytical capacity](#), we reported that analysts don't have enough support from researchers, and that they spend time on tasks that don't need analytical training and skills. The NCA should consider improving the data skills of all its intelligence officers, so they can carry out basic research and analysis. This would free up analysts' time to focus on more complex work.

## Innovative practice

### **The National Crime Agency develops artificial intelligence tools to tackle serious and organised crime**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) has developed artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance its operational capability, and to disrupt online threats across a range of areas, including in criminal marketplaces.

The agency's serious crime analysis section is working with academics to develop an AI tool that identifies links between serious crime cases. The NCA intends to use the tool to help it identify suspects involved in multiple crimes. At the time of our inspection, the agency had tested it and was preparing to integrate it into its IT systems.

The NCA is also developing AI tools to identify deepfake [indecent images of children](#), and to help it prioritise cases involving actual [victims](#). This could result in faster [safeguarding](#) responses. The victim identification team plans to use these tools to better safeguard victims.

## Main findings

### **The NCA produces the National Strategic Assessment**

One of the NCA's statutory functions is to produce the '[National Strategic Assessment 2025 of Serious and Organised crime](#)' (NSA). The NSA informs strategic priorities and provides direction to UK law enforcement agencies, as part of a whole-system approach to tackling SOC.

The agency's National Assessment Centre (NAC) produces the NSA, using intelligence from local, regional and national organisations, including police forces, [regional organised crime units \(ROCUs\)](#), government departments and law enforcement agencies. In total, the NAC consults more than 75 organisations while compiling the NSA.

The NAC can access most intelligence held by the agency. This includes sensitive intelligence. As a result, the NAC can inform the NSA, using intelligence that ranges from open source to top secret.

However, as we have reported in [our area for improvement relating to recording intelligence](#), the NAC can't access all the NCA's intelligence to inform either the NSA or its other work.

Despite this, most of the senior [police officers](#) we spoke to about the NSA felt that it was a valuable and accurate strategic document. Our survey of stakeholders supported this, with over 70 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the NSA's picture of SOC threats is accurate.

### **NCA units and organisations within the SOC system can apply to the NAC to commission other analytical intelligence work**

In addition to the NSA, the NAC produces a range of intelligence reports, including intelligence briefings, assessments and bespoke work. For example, it provides quick updates and specific analyses that help law enforcement agencies focus their operational activity.

There is a formal commissioning process, and the NAC gives clear guidance to applicants, which supports consistency. The guidance says that all applications for commissions must "relate to SOC and align to and inform the thematic areas and national intelligence requirements set out in line with the NSA".

The NAC uses a scoring matrix to prioritise applications. It considers customer priority, alignment with the national intelligence requirements, potential effects, efficiency of analysts' time, and the nature of the threat.

We found that in its weekly meetings, the NAC's senior leadership team reviewed applications for new work, assessing their potential to influence policy or operational decisions.

The NAC sets terms of reference for new work and reviews commissions regularly to make sure they remain relevant. These arrangements should result in work that is useful, timely and supports decision-making to tackle SOC.

### **The NCA has a process for developing and monitoring intelligence requirements**

As part of the annual NSA process, the NCA identifies and prioritises strategic intelligence requirements. It also issues new intelligence requests in response to emerging threat areas.

We found that the agency had robust processes for communicating these intelligence requirements to its units, the ROCUs and other organisations. These processes include collaborating with other organisations at strategic governance group meetings and governance boards. This means they can co-ordinate action to meet intelligence requirements.

The agency has started to record intelligence requirements on the [agency and partner management information system](#). This allows operational officers to self-brief and to access up-to-date tasking requests. These are requests for intelligence, such as those about a particular subject or threat area. However, several officers told us they still didn't know the strategic intelligence requirements.

We found that most people who received NCA intelligence requests said they felt that they were detailed and actionable. A total of 80 respondents to our survey said they had received NCA intelligence requests. Of these, 58 felt that they are “always” or “usually” specific enough and achievable.

### **The NCA collects intelligence from a wide range of UK-based organisations**

The NCA gathers intelligence from police forces, ROCUs, national law enforcement agencies and government departments.

It has strong links with the UK intelligence agencies, including embedded officers, and it has clear processes for asking for information from those agencies. These arrangements improve the NCA's understanding of threats relating to operations and investigations.

The agency collects intelligence from private sector organisations, including financial institutions and technology companies. The agency told us this intelligence strengthens its understanding of all the threats it deals with.

### **The NCA receives intelligence from many overseas jurisdictions**

The NCA collects intelligence from a wide range of international sources. As we have reported in [our chapter on leading a collaborative response to SOC](#), the agency has a global network of international liaison officers (ILOs), who work with partner law enforcement agencies in their host country. The ILO network helps the agency gather and share intelligence with international partners.

The agency also:

- collaborates with other members of the Five Eyes community (an intelligence alliance made up of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) to help bring about intelligence collection and sharing; and
- shares intelligence and taskings with [Interpol](#) and [Europol](#), and liaises with international agencies about biometrics and extradition.

## **The NCA uses a range of capabilities to collect large volumes of intelligence**

The NCA collects its own intelligence through a range of covert and overt methods. It uses covert capabilities in the UK and, where there is the opportunity, in overseas operations. These support the agency's work in tackling SOC threats.

It also uses overt methods, such as analysing open-source data, to inform its intelligence picture.

### **Case study: working with other law enforcement agencies to target money laundering**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) leads Project Chapelgate, which is proactive enforcement activity that targets high-value money laundering. The project focuses on intercepting criminal funds in transit. This allows law enforcement agencies to seize assets under the [Proceeds of Crime Act 2002](#).

The NCA operates Project Chapelgate under a memorandum of understanding with the Home Office. This agreement gives the NCA funding through the [Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme](#), which allows the NCA to reinvest a portion of seized criminal assets into the project.

The NCA and other law enforcement agencies have signed a memorandum of understanding that sets out how they participate in Project Chapelgate. This means all parties, including police forces in England and Wales, can benefit from the Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme funding when they are involved in seizing criminal assets. This encourages agencies to work collaboratively to tackle serious and organised crime.

In 2023, the Home Office reviewed the project. It found that since its inception in 2008, the NCA, working with police forces and other bodies as part of Project Chapelgate, had recovered more than £180 million.

The NCA uses the [intelligence](#) it obtains from this project and other operations, such as [Operation Venetic](#), to improve its understanding of money laundering in the UK and overseas.

## **The NCA can't readily access intelligence from some international partner agencies**

Although the NCA has broad access to intelligence, there are barriers that prevent it from obtaining all the relevant intelligence from some sources. For example, officers told us that:

- because of legislative changes after the UK's exit from the European Union, sharing intelligence with Europol partners is more complex, and the agency no longer has full access to their databases; and

- some international partners don't share all relevant intelligence.

These gaps make it harder for the agency to build a complete intelligence picture.

### **The NCA receives information and intelligence through many routes, but it doesn't have a single function that oversees all incoming material**

Some of the NCA's units, such as the combating kleptocracy cell and some threat areas, including organised immigration crime (OIC), have their own "gateways" for receiving intelligence. However, this isn't consistent across the agency. For example, intelligence relating to [child sexual exploitation](#) and abuse enters through several routes, including:

- the child sexual exploitation referrals bureau (CSERB);
- the intelligence and analysis unit;
- the victim identification unit;
- the Joint International Crime Centre (JICC); and
- NCA international teams.

The NCA doesn't have a comprehensive map of how it receives intelligence. This has resulted in isolated pockets of intelligence. At the time of our inspection, the JICC was working to consolidate these routes, but we found no evidence that other teams intended to do this.

In other areas, we found that the NCA's efforts to combine intelligence flows were still developing. For example, it was trying to establish the Fraud Targeting Centre (FTC) as the gateway for fraud-related intelligence. The NCA told us it updated the workforce about the FTC in an agency-wide intranet article, as well as using other communication methods. However, several officers told us the agency hadn't clearly communicated this, and they weren't confident that the FTC received all relevant material from other parts of the agency.

### **The NCA carries out targeted interceptions and shares the resulting intelligence effectively to support investigations**

The NCA's integrated communications and intelligence (ICI) team hosts the TI suite on behalf of UK law enforcement agencies. The ICI team includes officers from the NCA, the ROCUs and the [Metropolitan Police Service](#).

Officers in the TI suite record on the agency's sensitive intelligence system intelligence gathered during TI operations.

We found that the ICI team had established effective intelligence dissemination routes for TI material, and it had applied appropriate handling conditions to the intelligence it shared. It has also made the system available to the sensitive intelligence network, which includes the ROCUs' [sensitive intelligence units](#). This allows the sensitive intelligence network to access and analyse TI intelligence that is relevant to its operations.

The sensitive intelligence system is an end-of-life IT system. This means it is no longer being updated. The NCA plans to replace it, but officers told us this was taking longer than planned.

### **The NCA has good oversight processes for developing intelligence**

The NCA has an established structure to help leaders make sure intelligence development is proportionate, targeted and aligned with national priorities.

The agency's intelligence development meeting is central to making sure that intelligence collection is directed at priority operations. Those present at the meeting review progress against intelligence taskings, and they receive updates from officers with relevant tasking responsibilities.

A separate intelligence tasking group meeting oversees covert operations. Those present at the meeting review new and ongoing taskings to make sure covert intelligence development is in line with agency priorities and considers legal implications.

During the intelligence development stage of operations, the intelligence and investigations teams work together closely. For example, managers from intelligence and investigation teams agree to appoint a single point of contact in the investigations team. That person's role is to advise on covert methods and opportunities to gather evidence. The NCA has designed this process to speed up the effective transfer of operations from intelligence to investigation teams.

### **NCA intelligence teams don't always transfer cases to investigators at the right time**

Several NCA investigators and intelligence officers told us intelligence teams developed some operations for longer than necessary before transferring them to an investigation team. In some cases, this meant that specialist units deployed covert tactics months before operations were moved to an investigation team. This is inefficient, can result in outdated intelligence and may duplicate effort.

We found that there were several reasons why this happened. In some cases, investigation teams didn't have enough capacity to take on new cases. Several regional intelligence team officers also told us intelligence development managers didn't have specific training for their role. They hadn't received training to help them identify when an intelligence operation should move to an investigation. (See [our subsection on the NCA's understanding of its skills gaps and training needs](#).)

We also found that intelligence teams sometimes referred operations too early, before intelligence development was complete. To address this, one intelligence team had introduced monthly meetings, where a manager from the investigation team and intelligence officers reviewed intelligence operations. They assessed resource requirements, identified intelligence gaps and decided when a handover should take place. The agency told us it was introducing this process across all threat areas. If it puts this in place effectively, it should result in a better handover process.

### **The NCA is taking steps to improve compliance with disclosure obligations**

The NCA recognises that there is a risk that it can't fulfil disclosure obligations for all investigations. This is partly because of weaknesses in its intelligence development practices.

We found that some intelligence development officers didn't routinely consider disclosure obligations or save material in accessible formats. This delayed some investigations. In one case, after handover to an operational team, a [disclosure officer](#) spent a year assessing 2,000 computer files and 20,000 documents that intelligence officers had gathered.

The agency's end-to-end process, which defines the way intelligence operations should be moved to an investigation, instructs intelligence development officers to save material on ATLAS CM. We found that not all officers complied with this.

Under the end-to-end process, the chairs of agency tasking meetings should return intelligence operations that don't meet the necessary standards to intelligence teams for remedial work. If they comply with this, disclosure compliance should improve, and there should be fewer legal and operational risks.

### **The NCA has effective processes for sharing intelligence with partner organisations**

The NCA has clear policies and standard operating procedures for sharing intelligence. These follow national standards and use the intelligence handling codes set out in the [College of Policing's authorised professional practice for intelligence management](#). Senior managers authorise dissemination to make sure it doesn't negatively affect ongoing operations.

The agency contributes to the wider SOC system by sharing intelligence that comes from its specialist resources. When the NCA doesn't keep intelligence for its own operations, it passes it to other law enforcement agencies.

The NCA shares strategic analytical reports with partner organisations. It uses standard distribution lists for its routine reports. During the commissioning phase, the agency agrees the distribution of bespoke analytical work. As well as carrying out strategic and tactical assessments, it produces and shares analysis about new or emerging threats.

An interviewee from another part of the law enforcement system said the NCA disseminated intelligence well. They gave an example of the NCA sharing analysis about criminals who were importing drugs by dropping them into the sea around the UK. This analysis led to multi-agency collaboration and the development of strategic and tactical responses.

### **The NCA doesn't have the capacity it needs to manage intelligence effectively**

Limited resources reduce the agency's ability to manage intelligence effectively. Interviewees in many teams told us about the negative effects of officer shortages. These included:

- The national targeting centre's drugs team only worked on four main threat types and had to focus on high-risk development operations.
- The national targeting centre's economic crime team disbanded one of its units and didn't have capacity to support some operations.
- The national firearms targeting centre disbanded its sensitive intelligence unit.
- The human intelligence team couldn't progress some intelligence collection activity.

The agency's growing international footprint and increased focus on OIC have increased the workload of its international desk officers. Several officers told us the NCA international teams had received funding for additional ILOs and desk officers to support a drugs project. However, although this resulted in more ILO posts, the number of desk officers hasn't increased.

Due to the staffing shortages in the international desks, the desk officers don't have enough capacity to develop intelligence. One desk officer described their role as simply acting as a "post box" for intelligence.

The reassignment of officers to the CSERB and OIC intelligence has added to staffing pressures. For example, officers in two teams told us they had to spend 20 percent of their time helping to reduce the backlog in the CSERB. Some other teams had to pause several operations because of officers being reassigned to OIC intelligence. Despite this, at the time of our inspection, the CSERB still had a backlog of cases and OIC intelligence was still under resourced.

These staffing shortfalls reduce the agency's ability to manage some intelligence effectively.

### **Not all intelligence officers receive specialist training for their specific roles**

Intelligence officers in many units receive the specialist training they need so they can carry out their roles. For example, the NCA gives relevant officers training on managing sensitive intelligence.

However, we found a lack of training in some areas. For example, the training for regional intelligence managers didn't cover all the specialist skills they need. This includes reviewing and renewing covert authorities, compiling safeguarding strategies and giving evidence in court.

Many interviewees felt that these training and skills gaps contributed to the problems we described in [our subsection on transferring cases to investigators](#) and [our subsection on compliance with disclosure obligations](#).

Some interviewees in the agency's UK financial intelligence unit told us that not enough of its officers were trained or accredited financial intelligence officers. As a result, some officers have to rely on colleagues to carry out essential tasks, such as accessing the financial intelligence gateway. This creates inefficiencies and reduces the unit's effectiveness – for example, by contributing to backlogs of international financial requests.

### **The NCA has adopted the intelligence professionalisation programme, but not all officers have gained accreditation**

The NCA has adopted the national [intelligence professionalisation programme \(IPP\)](#) for intelligence officers. We found that intelligence officers in many teams were either IPP accredited or working towards accreditation.

However, in several other teams – such as the data and analysis hub, the target discovery and development team, and the JICC – not all intelligence officers were accredited or on the IPP pathway.

### **There is no structured approach to continuing professional development for long-serving intelligence officers**

Although new officers benefit from established training pathways, not all experienced officers receive refresher training. The operational standards, capability and assessment unit doesn't routinely [dip sample](#) these officers' training records, unless they have been recently promoted. As a result, the agency can't be sure these officers have the skills and knowledge they need to effectively carry out their roles.

However, we found examples of local [continuing professional development](#) initiatives in several units, including the combating kleptocracy cell, the NAC and some regional intelligence teams.

### **The NCA's IT infrastructure is unreliable and doesn't have enough data storage**

We outline our assessment of the agency's IT infrastructure in [our cause of concern](#). The unreliability of the infrastructure negatively affects how well the agency can understand and prioritise the threat from SOC.

Many of the agency's IT systems are slow to start and prone to crashing. This causes delays, reduces productivity and poses risks to time-critical activity, such as surveillance support and dynamic intelligence checks. Repeated email crashes have also delayed updates to the [Police National Computer](#), which creates risks to public safety.

The NCA uses unsupported technology for managing [suspicious activity reports](#). This exposes the agency to potential data breaches and operational vulnerabilities. The NCA knows about this risk, and it has included it in its corporate risk register.

We interviewed members of the federated tasking team; a unit made up of NCA officers and [police personnel](#). Some interviewees told us that the NCA's IT systems were slower and less stable than those used by the police.

### **The NCA's poor IT reduces the effectiveness of its criminal intelligence function**

When they are based overseas, international liaison officers don't have access to NCA systems such as ATLAS or the agency and partner management information system. They also can't access national systems such as the Police National Computer and the [Police National Database \(PND\)](#). This limits their ability to:

- access NCA and other UK intelligence systems, as they have to send all intelligence checks to UK-based desk officers, who may not respond immediately;
- respond promptly to intelligence requests from host-country agencies, which risks undermining the agency's reputation with important international partners; and
- share intelligence and bulk data with NCA colleagues, as they have to email this to desk officers, who then manually re-enter the information into the NCA's systems.

These limitations also increase desk officers' workload.

### **The NCA is developing new systems to improve access to intelligence**

As well as using artificial intelligence (see [our innovative practice on developing artificial intelligence tools to tackle SOC](#)), the agency has introduced, or is developing, new technological solutions to make better use of intelligence and support operational activity. These solutions include:

- exploiting social media – developing new tools to analyse social media content, in work that partner organisations have described as “transformational” and “outstanding”;
- streamlining analysis – using a new tactical analysis platform, which allows analysts to link information across systems and to map data, and which helps them prepare evidence for court; and

- improving partner organisations' access to intelligence – making Interpol intelligence systems available to frontline [police officers](#) on their handheld devices, and sharing the agency's database containing sensitive data with the ROCUs' sensitive intelligence network.

These initiatives show the agency's ambition to modernise its digital infrastructure and improve intelligence sharing across the SOC system.

### **The NCA should make sure it allocates PND licences to the most appropriate officers**

The PND allows law enforcement agencies and police forces to see what intelligence other organisations hold. It is essential to any intelligence assessment. In [our 2020 report, 'An inspection of the National Crime Agency's criminal intelligence function'](#), we reported that NCA intelligence officers found it difficult to access the PND.

We recommended:

“With immediate effect, the NCA should review and consolidate its Police National Database (PND) licences so that intelligence staff can quickly use this essential intelligence database when they need to.”

At the time of our inspection in early 2025, the NCA had 600 PND licences, and the agency told us this was enough. However, interviewees told us that officers in some units couldn't access the PND, as those units didn't hold any licences. We found that some other units – including the NAC, the national targeting centre, the JICC, victim identification teams and regional intelligence teams – didn't have enough licences for all officers who needed PND access. In some cases, officers had waited for years to gain access because the agency hadn't allocated licences appropriately and there were training backlogs.

[National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) data for June 2025 showed that of the 600 PND licences held by the NCA, only 392 had been used in that month. This means the NCA isn't making effective use of the licences it holds.

This reduces the agency's effectiveness. For example, interviewees told us it:

- delays [organised crime group \(OCG\) mapping](#);
- limits the NAC's capacity to produce comprehensive analyses; and
- prevents the [National Economic Crime Centre](#) from identifying some fraud cases that are investigated by other agencies.

The NCA's limited access to other agencies' intelligence on the PND may hinder intelligence sharing and delay operational processes.

## **The NCA has processes to make sure it complies with national standards and legislation**

The NCA has clear and comprehensive operating procedures for its intelligence processes, which are in line with relevant legislation and standards. These provide a consistent framework for intelligence officers, and they support legal compliance. First-line managers supervise officers' adherence to these procedures. Deputy directors and senior managers give additional assurance through monthly meetings.

The operational standards, capability and assessment unit carries out regular internal reviews of sensitive intelligence units. Between 2023 and 2025, it carried out more than 40 of these reviews, and it generally found good compliance.

Several other external agencies assure the agency's intelligence processes. These include:

- the [Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office](#);
- the [Financial Action Task Force](#);
- the [Government Internal Audit Agency](#); and
- the NPCC's sensitive intelligence network accreditation team.

## **The NCA is improving its capability to target criminal communications in response to technological change, but it still faces significant challenges**

A critical component of the NCA's and NPCC's ability to disrupt high-harm OCGs is their capability to access and exploit criminal communications, which OCGs want to protect.

As part of our inspection, we received a sensitive briefing on the NCA's efforts to overcome challenges associated with privacy-enhancing technology.

We concluded that the NCA is building improved capabilities. For example, we found that the NCA actively collaborates with UK intelligence community partners and other law enforcement agencies to keep pace with technological change. We were encouraged to see that the agency has developed new techniques to address some of the challenges posed by evolving technology. However, it still faces significant challenges.

# Investigating serious and organised crime

Good

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is good at investigating [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#).

The NCA investigates SOC, including cybercrime, [child sexual abuse](#), drugs, firearms, fraud, illicit finance, [modern slavery and human trafficking](#). Organised criminals continue to exploit global networks, artificial intelligence, and encryption technology. The NCA's investigations should disrupt these high-harm offenders and protect [vulnerable people](#). Its work is complex, global and vital to national security.

The NCA investigates high-harm offences very well. We found that these investigations were thorough, robust and effective. Many made effective use of the agency's specialist capabilities, including cyber, financial and covert investigation tools that aren't routinely available to police forces.

The agency uses its network of international liaison officers particularly well. This network helps the agency work closely with foreign law enforcement agencies at the highest level, and to disrupt and prevent SOC that affects the UK.

## Innovative practice

### **The National Crime Agency uses quarterly assurance reviews to strengthen governance, performance and standards in high-harm criminal investigations**

Quarterly assurance reviews (QARs) give the National Crime Agency (NCA) a structured framework for assessing investigative standards. Senior managers carry out these reviews with partner organisations such as the [Crown Prosecution Service](#). The reviews include assessments of various aspects of investigations, such as decision-making, compliance with [disclosure](#) responsibilities, [safeguarding](#) and [victim](#) care.

Each quarter, QAR panels review selected cases, test investigative hypotheses, and determine how best to progress enquiries. This early intervention helps the NCA identify and address legal, operational and financial risks before they escalate.

The panels identify lessons learned, and they share these with the operational standards, capability and assessment unit. This helps to support continuous improvement.

An NCA internal review found that QARs improved governance, supported officer development and enhanced the agency's ability to investigate crime and protect victims.

### **The National Crime Agency uses child protection advisers to help investigators safeguard vulnerable people**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) employs child protection advisers (CPAs) to support officers during operational activity. CPAs give expert guidance on [safeguarding](#), and they help manage checks and liaison between the NCA and other organisations. Although they mainly focus on child protection, CPAs can help officers by advising on all safeguarding matters.

All CPAs are qualified and registered social workers. They understand local and national safeguarding frameworks, and they work closely with partner organisations. We found several examples in which CPAs improved the standard of investigations. They also contribute to quarterly assurance reviews.

For example, during a high-risk case involving the [child](#) of a protected witness, the CPA intervened to speed up an urgent response from a partner organisation in very sensitive circumstances. This involved the [UK Protected Persons Service](#) and a director of social services.

The NCA's head of vulnerability leads the CPA team and chairs the NCA's quarterly safeguarding board. At the time of our inspection, this board was beginning to bring about improvements across the NCA. However, in cases in which CPAs aren't involved, we found less evidence of recorded safeguarding activity.

## Area for improvement

### **The National Crime Agency should introduce consistent governance and oversight for all investigations**

At the time of our inspection, the National Crime Agency (NCA) had well-established governance arrangements for its most serious investigations. During our inspection, we found that this approach didn't extend to providing the same levels of consistent oversight, governance and supervision for less complex and serious investigations.

For the NCA's highest-priority cases, we found evidence of regular investigations command meetings, a structured tasking process and good oversight. Senior leaders also carried out quarterly assurance reviews. As a result, these high-risk and high-profile investigations were subject to consistent checks on standards and progress.

However, these strong arrangements didn't extend to all investigations. During our case review, we found inconsistent levels of supervision and quality assurance. We also found that governance processes varied across teams. These findings were different from what we saw in the investigations the agency had prioritised. This restricts the NCA's overall strategic oversight of investigative standards.

The NCA doesn't have a policy that makes it clear how often supervisors should review all investigations. We found that when supervisors carried out reviews, they didn't always record them. This makes it difficult for the agency to track progress, or to hold officers to account for achieving the objectives of the investigation.

The governance process should include:

- clear expectations for structuring and recording investigation plans, including considerations about [victims](#) and [safeguarding](#);
- defined points at which supervisors and managers must review investigations and record findings; and
- assurance that, in relevant cases, reviews assess compliance with the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales \('the Victims' Code'\)](#).

The NCA should make sure it clearly defines its requirements for investigations case management. It should also make sure investigators fully understand and comply with these requirements.

To help the agency further improve investigative standards, victim care and compliance with the Victims' Code, it needs a function that is independent of the investigation process. This would provide senior leaders with the management information they need.

Problems with the agency's case management system, ATLAS CM, also negatively affect oversight. Investigators and managers told us ATLAS CM was difficult to use and didn't support effective case management. As a result, teams often create their own local systems to store data. This undermines oversight and review, and it means not all data is available to senior leaders.

The Victims' Code sets out the minimum level of service that the [criminal justice system](#) should provide to victims. At the time of our inspection, the NCA didn't have structured processes for giving senior leaders information about victims and safeguarding. This means the agency can't fully understand the overall level of service it provides to victims.

We found that the NCA doesn't routinely record how it meets the obligations of the Victims' Code. For example, investigators should complete and record needs assessments for all victims, but in many of the cases we reviewed, we found no evidence that investigators had done this. Without these assessments, the agency can't identify victims' needs or make sure they receive appropriate support. This means it isn't fully complying with the Victims' Code, and it risks further harm to victims. Some investigators told us they didn't always focus enough on victims and the Victims' Code during investigations.

The NCA knows about these problems, and it has included them in its corporate risk register.

## Main findings

### The NCA investigates high-harm cases very well

The NCA's operations are listed on its operational "grid", and the agency prioritises them according to threat and harm. This helps it effectively oversee operations, and it makes sure investigators have access to its specialist resources.

We reviewed 19 operations. We found that they had thorough, robust and effective investigations. Many made effective use of the agency's specialist capabilities, including cyber, financial and covert investigation tools that aren't routinely available to police forces.

The following four case studies, all of which relate to recent and current (at the time of our inspection) investigations, show how well the NCA investigates serious and complex crime.

### **Case study: investigation into an organised crime group that was illegally moving migrants from Turkey into the European Union**

Operation Sheetful was an investigation into an [organised crime group](#) that was illegally moving migrants from Turkey into the European Union. During the investigation, the National Crime Agency (NCA) used specialist capabilities to gather evidence, with a strong focus on [safeguarding](#) migrants. Investigators found that the criminal network was operating in the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRI) and across the European Union.

The NCA worked closely with local Kurdish authorities. This led to the UK-based subject of the investigation receiving a 17-year prison sentence. It also led to authorities arresting several KRI-based offenders, who were involved in the illegal movement of migrants.

In order to prevent future offending, the NCA and local Kurdish authorities carried out a social media campaign across the KRI. This showed the global reach of the NCA and the potential consequences of being involved in this sort of criminal activity. The NCA estimates that the campaign reached 85 percent of Facebook users in the KRI.

### **Case study: investigation into an organised crime group that was importing cocaine into the UK**

Operation Preterdetermined was an investigation into an [organised crime group \(OCG\)](#) that was involved in large-scale importations of cocaine into the UK. The OCG dropped off the drugs at sea then distributed them throughout the UK.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) worked with [South Wales Police](#), and a wide range of national and international partners, including law enforcement agencies in Dubai, Ecuador, Argentina and Taiwan. This allowed the NCA to move the original investigation to a higher level, and to pursue the offenders at the top of the OCG.

The NCA made effective use of the powers held by other organisations. For example, the agency used HM Revenue and Customs legislation to seize a marine vessel.

As a result of high-level partnership working across global law enforcement agencies, officers recovered 1.2 tonnes of cocaine, which was valued at £35 million. Four main members of the OCG were sentenced to a combined total of 90 years' imprisonment.

### **Case study: investigation into the importing and supply of illegal firearms**

Operation Satisfice was an investigation into a UK-based foreign national who was believed to be involved in importing weapons parts into the UK from Europe. The subject was also believed to be involved in converting and supplying firearms and ammunition.

The National Crime Agency worked with Slovakian law enforcement partners to identify the subject's transport methods and routes. As a result of this work and a detailed investigation, officers arrested the subject.

During searches of the subject's property, officers recovered two pistols, ammunition and gunpowder, and a considerable amount of equipment used to manufacture ammunition.

The subject of the operation was convicted of possession of a prohibited weapon and ammunition. At the time of our inspection, the subject was awaiting sentence.

### **Case study: investigation into an organised crime group that was illegally moving migrants from north Africa to Europe**

Operation Wireworker was an investigation into an organised crime group that was involved in illegally moving large numbers of migrants from north Africa to Europe. The main subject of the operation worked with people-smuggling networks in north Africa to ship migrants across the Mediterranean.

The journeys involved hundreds of migrants travelling on dangerous vessels, with significant risks to their safety.

During the investigation, the National Crime Agency used a wide range of specialist resources, and it worked closely with the Italian financial police and coastguard. This allowed the agency to gather evidence of the subject's involvement in at least 7 sea crossings, and in the movement of almost 3,800 migrants into Italian waters. The criminals made £12.3 million from the people smuggling.

As a result of the investigation, the subject was convicted of conspiring to assist illegal immigration and was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment.

We also found other positive evidence. In [Operation Venetic](#), for example, the NCA and the [Crown Prosecution Service](#) worked together to respond to many legal challenges, and to develop new ways of managing evidential material so that it can be used in judicial proceedings.

The NCA has since shared this practice through joint training events with the Crown Prosecution Service and [Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996](#) disclosure working groups.

### **The quality of investigations varies across the agency**

We found that for investigations that the NCA didn't classify as top priority, including those that were less serious or complex, the agency's oversight, governance and supervision wasn't consistent.

We found that in some investigations, the quality of recorded supervision and oversight was often linked to the complexity and level of harm involved in the case. The NCA doesn't investigate some lower-level cases to the same standard as more complex cases. Limited resources and poor oversight arrangements contribute to the difference in quality. The agency told us it had to make decisions based on threat, risk and harm when prioritising its investigative response.

Systemic IT problems also affect investigations into both high-harm and lower-harm offences. The agency uses ATLAS CM inconsistently. In some cases, we found that investigators failed to create an ATLAS CM record. Instead, they used one of more than 20 other platforms. This practice makes it difficult for supervisors to effectively oversee investigations. It also increases the risks of poor exhibit management and failing to comply with Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 disclosure requirements.

Thorough, timely and well-supervised investigation plans increase the likelihood of identifying perpetrators and bringing them to justice. According to the agency's policy, investigators should use ATLAS CM to record an investigation plan for every case. However, we found that investigators didn't do this consistently. Instead, many relied on locally produced plans, which they saved on different systems.

We found that investigation plans had only been created in 38 of the 68 relevant cases that we reviewed. Not having recorded investigation plans makes it difficult for senior managers to monitor the effectiveness of investigations and make sure investigators are meeting the required standards.

Investigators told us they often couldn't access timely analytical support. This affects the timeliness and quality of investigations. We explore this problem further in [our chapter on how the agency understands and prioritises the threat from SOC](#).

### **Some investigative teams don't have enough capacity to carry out thorough investigations**

Certain teams in the NCA are under sustained pressure, and some officers feel overwhelmed by their high workloads. For example, demand at Heathrow Airport, caused by the arrest of drugs couriers, has substantially increased. Between January and May 2025, the agency's Heathrow team dealt with 276 cannabis couriers, compared with 114 in the same period of the previous year.

In response to the increase in demand, investigation teams at Heathrow are prioritising some lines of enquiry. However, they aren't pursuing other lines, such as searching houses and analysing phones. This limits how well the agency can carry out thorough investigations. It may also have a negative effect on outcomes in SOC cases.

In order to meet demand and priorities, the agency moves its officers between teams. However, this can have a negative effect on some teams' abilities to carry out their main duties.

For example, interviewees told us that officers in the victim identification team were spending 20 percent of their time responding to demand in the [child sexual exploitation](#) referrals bureau. Similarly, interviewees told us that the focus of undercover online (UCOL) operations had shifted from child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) investigations to organised immigration crime. The interviewees said that UCOL officers previously spent 60 percent of their time investigating CSEA. They said this had dropped to 5–10 percent, even though risk and demand in that area hadn't reduced. Some interviewees told us that using UCOL officers to deal with organised immigration crime wasn't an effective tactic.

### **The NCA is improving the way it safeguards vulnerable people**

In 2022, we inspected the NCA's effectiveness in [protecting vulnerable people](#). In [our report, 'Safeguarding: How effective is the National Crime Agency at protecting vulnerable people?'](#), we identified several areas in which the NCA needed to improve.

The agency is making progress. It has established a [safeguarding](#) board, which is chaired by the head of vulnerability. The board has raised awareness of safeguarding throughout the agency.

The NCA has also made some progress in making safeguarding an integral part of its investigative work. It now employs child protection advisers (CPAs) to support officers during operational activity (see [our innovative practice on using CPAs to help investigators safeguard vulnerable people](#)). However, an interviewee told us that CPAs aren't always involved in the early intelligence development stage, when safeguarding risks may first emerge.

In most operational teams, we found a strong focus on safeguarding. Most officers understood their responsibilities well. During our operational reviews, we found that most [senior investigating officers](#) recorded safeguarding strategies. However, despite this progress, we still found some shortcomings.

Senior leaders acknowledge that the NCA doesn't consistently prioritise safeguarding. Although the safeguarding board and the head of vulnerability have improved awareness, some officers still see safeguarding as the responsibility of specialist teams.

To incorporate safeguarding into all operational areas, the NCA needs to make sure all officers understand their role in identifying and responding to vulnerability.

According to agency policy, officers must complete online training about safeguarding. Supervisors should make sure their officers have completed this training. Some officers told us that the training had improved their awareness of safeguarding. Others felt that it was too generic and could be better. The NCA should consider reviewing the training to make sure it gives officers the knowledge they need to carry out safeguarding effectively.

The NCA should introduce a specific place on the ATLAS CM system for officers to record victim and safeguarding considerations. This would help with the agency's governance, review and supervision of cases. Without structured data, the agency can't monitor its safeguarding performance or identify missed opportunities.

### **The NCA needs to improve its 4P approach when investigating SOC**

NCA investigative teams should identify [4P](#) opportunities to:

- prevent SOC from happening;
- pursue SOC offenders;
- protect people and businesses from becoming victims of organised criminals; and
- prepare law enforcement agencies and communities for when SOC happens.

Investigators should use the case management system to record their considerations and what action has been taken.

We didn't find evidence that the NCA uses tactical 4P plan templates to manage SOC investigations. An interviewee told us the agency didn't have this sort of template. Not all the investigative strategies or policies we examined included documented 4P considerations. We found that investigation teams tended to focus on pursue activity to identify offenders and bring them to justice. Many investigators told us they felt that the NCA was a pursue-centred organisation. As a result, this was what they focused on.

However, we did find some examples of the NCA carrying out activity to protect potential victims and to prevent SOC from happening, including the following case study.

#### **Case study: investigation into boiler-room fraud**

Operation Rundlet was an operation that targeted boiler-room fraud – that is, high-pressure investment scams in which criminals cold call potential [victims](#). During the operation, the National Crime Agency (NCA) focused strongly on prevent and prepare activity to complement its pursue investigations, according to the [4P approach](#).

The NCA trialled a new method of sharing investigation information with financial institutions. This gave those institutions an early warning system about potential victims, so they could act to protect them.

At the time of our inspection, the NCA was developing a standard operating procedure to formalise this approach.

In Operation Judiciary, the NCA worked with local police to disrupt an offender's activity by targeting his driving offences. Although this wasn't formally recorded as prevent activity, it contributed to disruption and reduced the offender's ability to operate.

The NCA also uses the media to support its 4P objectives. The agency told us that each quarter, the NCA director general meets with the Crime Reporters Association to highlight successes and explain how the public can protect themselves. Operation Venetic also showed how working with the media can publicise the agency's role in tackling SOC.

We found that some investigators didn't fully understand how to carry out effective prevent, prepare and protect activity. A better understanding of these areas would result in more opportunities to safeguard victims, disrupt criminal networks earlier and prevent harm.

### **The NCA works well with public and private sector organisations, both in the UK and internationally, to investigate SOC**

In [our chapter on leading a collaborative response to SOC](#), we assess the NCA's partnership working. In this subsection, we focus on the way the agency's partnership working helps it investigate SOC and support other law enforcement agencies in tackling organised criminals. To achieve positive outcomes, the agency needs to investigate effectively with support from partner organisations.

Through its network of international liaison officers, the NCA has developed strong relationships with law enforcement agencies and governments in other countries. The network plays a critical role in co-ordinating cross-border investigations and improving the flow of intelligence. The agency also has officers working in [Europol](#), which strengthens its international relationships.

The NCA supports UK police forces' investigations. For example, in relation to homicide investigations, it:

- gives expert advice and resources; and
- keeps a list of subject matter experts, which it provides to police senior investigating officers who lead serious and complex investigations.

The NCA also attends the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)'s homicide working group, where the agency helps to identify best practice and improve the way forces investigate and prevent homicides. For example, the NCA has given a presentation on the work of its forensic medical advice and crime team. It has also shared a paper about bone pathology, in order to help partner organisations develop better investigation strategies. Police investigators told us they value these contributions, and that it helps them secure positive criminal justice outcomes.

The NCA's serious crime analysis section supports police investigations into serious violent and sexual offences. However, staffing reductions at the agency have led to backlogs. At the time of our inspection, there was a large backlog of referrals that the agency needed to add to its database. The NCA's partnership work is a strength, but some areas need more support and investment.

### **The NCA co-ordinates the management of SOC offenders**

The NCA's [lifetime offender management](#) team co-ordinates all the agency's [Serious Crime Prevention Orders](#) and other offender orders. It records applications and outcomes. It also monitors for breaches, and it uses a tiered response when offenders don't comply with orders.

The agency also has a structured process for uploading subjects of interest to the [Police National Database \(PND\)](#). The responsible team checks data compliance while it carries out the [flagging](#) process. This helps reduce the risk of sharing inaccurate or outdated information.

The NCA supports UK police forces to find and arrest offenders overseas. The Joint International Crime Centre's extradition team prioritises wanted suspects according to threat, risk and harm. The team works closely with international law enforcement partners to secure evidence and arrest suspects. The agency showed us several strong examples of this in practice, which show that it can co-ordinate complex cross-border operations and bring high-risk offenders to justice.

### **The NCA needs to improve the way it responds to international arrest warrants**

The agency often receives international arrest warrants from foreign law enforcement agencies, and this can happen on different platforms. [Interpol](#) notifications automatically update the [Police National Computer \(PNC\)](#), but they don't automatically update other platforms.

When the agency receives a notification of a warrant, its officers should check the PND for any intelligence about the wanted person, then they should update the PNC. Officers told us they didn't always carry out these steps because there weren't enough resources or PND licences in the relevant departments. This means that the agency may not always consider relevant information or potential lines of enquiry.

## **The NCA is working on improving its understanding of its investigative demand**

At the time of our inspection, the agency didn't have a comprehensive understanding of its current or future investigative demand. To address these problems, the NCA's investigations command is trialling a resource allocation model known as Project Prosopis. The model uses detailed process mapping and workload profiling to estimate the resources the agency needs for different types of investigations. It also shows how variations in the number of suspects or victims can increase or decrease demand.

With this approach, the NCA aims to plan more accurately and better align its investigators' deployments with operational need. If it is put in place successfully, the model could improve the way the agency manages demand, reduce pressure on teams and enhance the quality of investigations.

At the time of our inspection, the NCA had commissioned an external body to carry out an evidence-based assessment of its resourcing requirement for CSEA investigations. The assessment found that to achieve the performance framework target of carrying out 61 CSEA investigations each year, the agency would need to increase the number of investigators in the CSEA teams by 7.5 percent.

This shows the scale of the resourcing shortfall in one of the agency's teams. It also shows the value of using evidence-based models to inform workforce planning.

## **The NCA operational standards, capability and assessment unit develops and oversees the training of investigators**

The operational standards, capability and assessment unit (OSCAU) plays a central role in building the NCA's investigative capability. It gives oversight, guidance and assurance to make sure officers meet the required standards.

The OSCAU has developed a structured officer development programme, which includes induction training for new officers and [continuing professional development \(CPD\)](#) throughout their careers. The purpose of this process is to maintain consistency, professionalism and high standards in investigations.

The OSCAU also manages the [professionalising investigations programme \(PIP\)](#) accreditation process. This programme provides clear pathways for investigators to gain and maintain accreditation. The OSCAU organises this process well, and the officers we interviewed clearly understood it.

However, the OSCAU only holds and manages accreditation for core training for newly appointed or promoted officers, PIP and initial professional development levels. It doesn't keep a list of officers with specialist accreditation, such as those for the [specialist child abuse investigation development programme](#). This means the agency can't fully understand whether all officers hold the appropriate specialist accreditations for their roles.

## **The NCA should make sure it provides training to all specialist investigators**

We found for most officers in specialist teams, the NCA provided training specific to their roles. For example, most officers in the [child exploitation and online protection](#) command had completed the specialist child abuse investigation development programme. Officers in the witness care unit told us their training to support victims and witnesses was effective.

The NCA sources some specialist training from external providers. For example, the developer of the software for CSEA investigations gave officers training to develop their digital forensic skills. Investigators told us this training was excellent.

The agency co-ordinates a wide range of CPD events. Officers told us they could access these events without delay. This supports their development and operational readiness. The OSCAU contributes to CPD by sharing lessons learned from quarterly assurance reviews and cold-case debriefs.

However, we found that not all investigators receive the specialist training they need. For example, not all officers working on CSEA investigations had received [achieving best evidence](#) training. The NCA should address this problem and align training with existing OSCAU processes. We also found that some senior investigating officers hadn't received the relevant training and hadn't achieved PIP level 3 accreditation. The agency told us it knew about this and planned to address it.

## **The NCA must improve the way it manages PNC records for people it arrests**

The NCA doesn't have its own custody facilities. When NCA officers arrest a suspect, they take them to a police force custody facility. An arrest/summons report is then created. This generates a reference number relating to that person's arrest, and there will then be a record of it on the PNC.

The way the arrest/summons report is made varies. Either the NCA's PNC bureau creates it on request from an NCA officer, or the relevant police force creates it on its internal custody system. If the relevant force creates the report, it can ask the NCA to be responsible for it. Alternatively, the NCA can ask the force to transfer responsibility to the agency.

If the arresting officer doesn't ask the NCA's PNC bureau to create the report, or if the officer doesn't tell the PNC bureau when a force has created a report, the force keeps responsibility for the PNC record of that person's arrest. This means that the NCA can't directly manage or update records for these suspects. This has led to forces deleting records, fingerprints and DNA samples that should have been kept.

When the NCA takes no further action against a suspect, or if a suspect is found not guilty in court, the agency doesn't always update either its own or the relevant force's PNC records. Therefore, the PNC may hold some records that are in breach of the [Protection of Freedoms Act 2012](#) and the [Data Protection Act 2018](#). These problems may apply to many cases.

When we raised this problem with the NCA during our inspection, we were pleased that the agency responded quickly. It introduced urgent measures, including clearer guidance for officers, a system that officers can use 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to update the PNC bureau, and increased staffing levels in the bureau.

Officers in the bureau are reviewing records to identify which ones they need to update, delete or transfer. The NCA has identified further actions that it plans to carry out to resolve the problem – for example, monitoring the [agency and partner management information system](#) to check if officers are creating PNC records when they arrest suspects. We will continue to monitor the agency's progress against its intended actions.

### **The NCA is improving its processes for crime recording**

We reviewed crime recording as part of our crime file review. We found that the NCA didn't always identify notifiable offences or report them to the relevant police force. We also didn't find any evidence of a consistent process for doing this.

The NCA told us it was aware of these issues. It said it had worked with a subject matter expert to develop a crime-recording policy and give all officers training. It was due to introduce this policy and the improved processes in June 2025, but the agency told us it had been delayed until April 2026.

The NCA has consulted with the Home Office and police forces to improve the way it reports crime. The agency told us it was creating a new reporting form for officers to officially notify forces. The agency plans to carry out a thematic review six months after it has introduced the reporting form. The NCA should prioritise this work and improve these processes without further delay.

# Leading a collaborative response to serious and organised crime

Good

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is good at leading, supporting and co-ordinating a whole system response to [serious and organised crime \(SOC\)](#).

[The Government's serious and organised crime strategy 2023 to 2028](#) sets out nine main crime threats that have both an international reach and a direct effect on communities in the UK. It also states that the Home Office is responsible for the overall response to SOC, and that the NCA leads and co-ordinates the UK law enforcement response.

The NCA works with a broad range of organisations in the UK and overseas. These include law enforcement agencies, police forces, government departments, the [intelligence](#) community, regulators, the private sector, academia and charities. We held interviews and focus groups with a broad selection of these organisations. We also sent a survey to 299 representatives from these organisations. We received 114 responses to the survey. The breakdown of the responses by organisation is shown below.

**Figure 2: Responses by organisation type**

Organisation type	Number of responses
Government department or agency	47
Law enforcement agency	35
Police force	15
Private organisation	7
Other	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>

**Source: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services NCA customer survey**

Overall, we found that the NCA co-ordinates the UK's response to SOC effectively. This is despite the challenges that we describe in [our chapter on managing finances](#) and [our cause of concern about IT capability and strategy](#). The officers in the NCA deserve great credit for this.

However, the NCA recognises that it could improve the way in which it communicates with partners. Towards the end of our inspection, the NCA gave us a draft communications plan, which it intended to use to address this issue. If the NCA puts this plan in place effectively, it could strengthen the agency's ability to co-ordinate activity.

## Main findings

In this section we set out our main findings that relate to how well the NCA leads, supports and co-ordinates a whole system response to SOC.

### **In general, the NCA works well with partner organisations**

We found that in general, the NCA had good strategic and operational partnerships with a wide variety of organisations.

The NCA uses various methods to encourage collaboration in tackling SOC. These include the national strategic tasking and co-ordinating group, which meets every six months. The NCA director general chairs this group. Attendees include regional SOC chief constables and other senior stakeholders.

Through this group, the NCA can exercise its power under section 5(1) of the [Crime and Courts Act 2013](#) to formally direct Home Office police forces in England and Wales, as well as [British Transport Police](#) and the [Serious Fraud Office](#). The group is supported by the national tactical tasking and co-ordination group, which meets each quarter. The NCA's director general responsible for threats and the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#)'s SOC lead chair this group.

However, the NCA usually relies on more collaborative methods to encourage wider partner involvement. These include formal collaboration agreements and memoranda of understanding with partner organisations, such as industry and regulatory bodies.

Our survey results supported these findings. Overall, 38 percent of respondents considered the agency to be very or extremely effective. These results were consistent with the views we heard in interviews and focus groups, in which representatives from partner organisations were generally positive about the NCA's collaborative approach.

**Figure 3: Responses in relation to how effective the NCA is at leading the national operational response to SOC**

<b>How effective is the NCA at leading the national operational response to SOC?</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Extremely effective	6
Very effective	37
Somewhat effective	59
Not so effective	11
Not at all effective	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>

**Source: His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services NCA customer survey**

### **Organised crime partnerships with police forces usually work well**

Organised crime partnerships (OCPs) are collaborations between the NCA and police forces. They are designed to tackle SOC through joint intelligence, enforcement and disruption operations. As part of our inspection, we visited the OCPs in London, Merseyside and Scotland to assess their effectiveness.

In general, these partnerships work well. We found that the joint working arrangements helped officers learn from each other and develop their skills. The partnerships also make it easier for officers in the OCP to access each organisation’s intelligence. This improves operational co-ordination and decision-making in the OCPs.

However, some interviewees told us that the OCPs didn’t have enough officers, and we found that the problem was most pronounced in London. An interviewee told us that at the time of our inspection, the OCP had only 55 percent of the staffing level agreed for the NCA, and 85 percent of that agreed for the [Metropolitan Police Service](#). Officers said these shortfalls were because of funding pressures on both organisations. We also found that none of the OCPs we visited had enough analysts or financial investigators, which limited how well they could support investigations.

In [our chapter on investigating SOC](#), we reported on problems with the NCA’s [safeguarding](#) arrangements. However, we found that safeguarding practices were better in the OCPs. In many cases, [senior investigating officers](#) had documented safeguarding strategies. We also saw clear processes for accessing support services.

NCA leaders raised concerns that some OCP operations should be led by [regional organised crime units \(ROCUs\)](#) or police forces, rather than by the agency. Forces also expressed frustration with the OCP tasking process, stating that it didn’t always consider local context. Some interviewees told us that this often led to

confusion, as they had to consider conflicting priorities. The NCA and forces in the OCPs would benefit from reviewing their memoranda of understanding to clarify which types of operations should be assigned to the OCPs.

### **The NCA collaborates well nationally**

We found many examples of the NCA working collaboratively to tackle SOC, including through the NCA's [National Economic Crime Centre \(NECC\)](#) and the Joint International Crime Centre (JICC).

The NECC is a multi-agency unit, which focuses on reducing fraud, combating illicit finance and seizing proceeds of crime. In its [2024/25 annual report](#), the NECC states that the unit has 129 staff members and 15 secondees. This is broadly in line with what we found during our inspection. The secondees were from law enforcement agencies, regulators, government departments and the private sector.

The NECC plays an important role in shaping the UK's strategic response to economic crime. It develops national strategies to guide policing and government departments in addressing economic crime.

For example, the NECC worked with partners to agree the national definition of a professional enabler as "an individual or organisation that is providing professional services that enable criminality. Their behaviour is deliberate, reckless, improper, dishonest and/or negligent through a failure to meet their professional and regulatory obligations." It has published a [strategy](#) on how professional enablers should be tackled. It has also developed a high-value target list to support enforcement. The South West ROCU successfully piloted the strategy, and it has since been put in place in ROCUs and police forces nationally.

The following case study shows how effectively the NCA can co-ordinate the national response.

#### **Case study: investigation into money laundering**

Operation EMMA (European money mule action) was a [Europol](#)-led operation that targeted people who transfer illegally acquired money on behalf of criminals.

As part of the operation, from September to November 2024, the National Crime Agency's [National Economic Crime Centre](#), in conjunction with [City of London Police](#), co-ordinated activity with 13 partner organisations. This activity resulted in 76 arrests, the seizure of £818,000 in cash and cryptocurrency, and asset freezing orders that totalled £556,000.

These outcomes show the National Economic Crime Centre's ability to co-ordinate multi-agency responses to complex financial crime.

### **Case study: investigation into fraud**

Operation Henhouse is an operation led by the [National Economic Crime Centre \(NECC\)](#) and [City of London Police](#). It is a multi-agency operation that targets fraud criminality.

The NECC jointly co-ordinated Henhouse 4, which took place in February 2025. It involved activity in all UK police forces and [regional organised crime units](#), alongside national agencies including the [Financial Conduct Authority](#), [National Trading Standards](#) and the National Crime Agency.

This activity resulted in 433 arrests, 156 voluntary interviews, 471 cease and desist notices being served, account freezing orders of £4 million being issued, and £7.5 million in cash and asset seizures.

This shows the NECC's ability to co-ordinate multi-agency responses to financial crime throughout the UK.

The NCA hosts the JICC, which supports UK police forces and acts as the NCA's central point of contact in relation to international crime. NCA officers and police secondees staff this unit under a formal collaboration agreement. The JICC supports UK law enforcement agencies in areas such as international training, extradition services, biometrics, intelligence development and analysis.

The JICC works closely with [Interpol](#) and [Europol](#), and it deals with about 1,000 Interpol contacts a week. This high volume of contact reflects its central role in managing international law enforcement co-operation.

The NCA has also established many secondments with other organisations to support its work in tackling SOC. For example, there are secondments between the NCA and [Ofcom](#). Both organisations share information and collaborate to help investigations and shape legislation. An interviewee told us that this collaboration has contributed to improvements in safeguarding on social media platforms. It has also contributed to combating the threat posed by 3D-printed firearms.

The following case study shows how the NCA has collaborated with partner organisations to tackle the supply of firearms.

### **Case study: strategic, operational and international collaboration to reduce the number of firearms in circulation**

In 2021, law enforcement agencies identified a growing threat from top-venting blank-firing pistols (TVBFs). Although people could legally import TVBFs, criminals then obtained the guns and illegally converted them to fire live rounds.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) identified that since 2019, approximately 22,000 TVBFs had been imported into the UK, mostly from Turkey. In response, it led Project Sergeancy, a four-year, multi-agency operation, which involved partner organisations from across the UK and abroad.

The NCA worked with industry, [regional organised crime units](#), police forces, the [National Ballistics Intelligence Service](#), [Border Force](#), forensic providers, and the Gun Trade Association. This led to them:

- identifying people who were buying TVBFs;
- sharing intelligence packages;
- co-ordinating enforcement actions;
- seizing 486 firearms; and
- carrying out 198 disruptions across the UK.

The NCA also worked with the Home Office and the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) to carry out forensic testing. This confirmed that criminals could easily convert many of the TVBFs using basic tools. This led to the Government reclassifying these weapons under the [Firearms Act 1968](#). Border Force supported the effort by intercepting shipments into the UK.

Internationally, the NCA used its international liaison officer network to communicate with manufacturers and share intelligence with overseas law enforcement agencies.

In February 2025, the NCA supported the National Ballistics Intelligence Service in a national firearms amnesty, which focused on the re-classified TVBFs. This led to 2,962 TVBFs being voluntarily surrendered, which substantially reduced the number of potentially convertible firearms in circulation. Nevertheless, the number of TVBFs in circulation is still a concern.

### **The NCA has good international links**

Due to the scope of this inspection, we couldn't visit international liaison officers (ILOs) overseas or speak to the foreign agencies that work with the NCA. The findings in this subsection of the report come from:

- document reviews;
- case studies;
- interviews and focus groups with NCA officers, UK law enforcement agencies and other partners; and
- survey results.

The NCA has a strong global presence. It has 160 ILOs, who are deployed in 60 countries. It also has about 25 officers who work under bilateral agreements with countries that can help tackle SOC threats to the UK.

The agency uses an intelligence-led approach to determine where it deploys its ILOs. It assigns each country two scores: one relating to the SOC threat to the UK, and the other based on an evaluation of the country's capability to tackle SOC. This process allows the NCA to prioritise its deployments so they can have the greatest effect.

The NCA gave us many examples of ILOs developing relationships with other organisations, and how these relationships had helped to tackle SOC threats to the UK. This has led to joint work that disrupted the supply routes of small boats used by criminal gangs involved in organised immigration crime. The NCA also has agreements that allow it to obtain electronic data from non-UK service providers. This gives the agency valuable intelligence, which has supported operations.

The NCA has also worked collaboratively with [Border Force](#) and the Thai authorities to reduce drugs importations into the UK.

### **The NCA works with partner organisations to tackle cybercrime**

The National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU) is part of the NCA. It responds to critical cyber incidents and carries out longer-term activity against criminals. Senior NCA officers told us about the NCCU's work in combating cyberattacks on national infrastructure.

To achieve this, the NCCU works with a wide range of organisations to target cybercriminals. These organisations include police forces, ROCUs, international law enforcement agencies and the [cybersecurity](#) industry.

The NCCU also hosts a strategic cyber industry group, which brings together law enforcement and private industry to understand the threat, improve intelligence collection and identify strategic priorities. The group's meetings are usually attended by more than 70 representatives from sectors such as finance, insurance, retail and gaming. The meetings help to improve law enforcement agencies' understanding of cyber threats.

The following case study shows how the NCA has worked collaboratively to tackle cybercrime.

### **Case study: investigation into cybercrime**

Operation Cronos was a successful National Crime Agency (NCA) joint cybercrime operation.

Working with American and European law enforcement agencies, the NCA disrupted the LockBit ransomware group. The NCA viewed this group as the most harmful cybercrime group in the world. The operation involved infiltrating LockBit's system, obtaining its data and locking the criminals out.

It resulted in suspects being arrested in Poland and Ukraine, the freezing of more than 200 cryptocurrency accounts, and support for UK [victims](#).

### **The NCA supports law enforcement agencies in managing high-risk individuals**

The NCA's anti-kidnap and extortion unit supports UK and overseas police forces' response to kidnappings. It provides national training to police forces and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to give tactical advice and support for live operations across the UK. It also helps prevent kidnappings by giving preventative advice to organisations that may be vulnerable to extortion.

The NCA also manages and leads the [UK Protected Persons Service](#). This service protects people who law enforcement agencies assess as being at risk of serious harm. This might be because they have helped the police with investigations into serious crime. The service operates across the UK in partnership with the Metropolitan Police Service, [Police Scotland](#) and the [Police Service of Northern Ireland](#). These organisations manage the risk in their force areas.

### **The NCA collaborates with other organisations to raise awareness about SOC**

The NCA uses its national position to raise awareness about SOC, and to give preventative advice to vulnerable communities.

For example, it worked with ROCUs and Meta to develop a social media campaign aimed at Chinese students in UK universities, who were being targeted for money laundering. This campaign reached a million people. The NCA also funded the national promotion of a school initiative that was designed to prevent fraud.

These campaigns show the NCA's commitment to working in partnership to prevent SOC.

### **The NCA co-ordinates and leads national activity to prevent harm caused by the supply of drugs**

In July 2023, in response to a rise in deaths related to synthetic opioids such as nitazenes, the NCA started Project Housebuilder. The agency created the operation to lead the law enforcement response to this growing threat.

As part of the operation, the NCA worked with the [Office for Health Improvement and Disparities](#), police forces, coroners, health services, Border Force and other partners. The agency set up a [gold group](#) to co-ordinate activity. It also created a senior investigating officer forum so that officers dealing with drug-related deaths could share learning.

Internationally, the NCA worked with the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China to raise awareness of the scale of the problem, and to bring about legislative change.

Domestically, the agency consulted academic experts on the effects of nitazenes. It also helped the NPCC's drugs lead equip officers with naloxone spray; a medicine that rapidly reverses the effects of opioid overdoses.

In May 2025, a [Home Office report on the police carriage of naloxone](#) said that by the end of December 2024, 32 UK police forces had some provision of naloxone. It also said that by the end of December 2024, police had administered naloxone 1,232 times.

This project shows the NCA's ability to co-ordinate a multi-agency response to emerging drug threats, combining enforcement, prevention and working with international partners.

### **The NCA counters SOC threats from hostile states**

The [UK Government's National Security Strategy 2025](#) highlights rising threats from hostile states, in relation to both terrorism and SOC.

The NCA's combating kleptocracy cell works in a tripartite relationship with the UK intelligence community and [Counter Terrorism Policing](#) to tackle these threats where they overlap with SOC. It also works closely with the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#) and the [Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation](#).

Much of the combating kleptocracy cell's work is operationally sensitive. As well as criminal justice interventions, it also works with a broad range of regulatory bodies to carry out disruptions.

At the time of our inspection, a senior interviewee told us that the cell was operating on half its envisaged staffing, which limits how effective it can be.

### **The NCA has effective multi-agency strategic governance groups**

The director general of the NCA delegates responsibility to strategic governance groups (SGGs) for leading and co-ordinating the national response to each of the strategic crime threats. These multi-agency groups are chaired by NCA directors or threat leads.

The NCA holds SGGs for each crime threat area, apart from [acquisitive crime](#) (when a criminal acquires material gain from the crime, such as taking property or money from the victim), which the NPCC manages.

As part of our inspection, we observed at least one SGG for each threat area and reviewed minutes of the previous three meetings. We found that all SGGs had clear terms of reference, and that they met each quarter. They were well attended and included representatives from a broad range of agencies. The minutes were generally of good quality. They highlighted important points and assigned and tracked actions appropriately.

Each SGG has a strategic action plan. We reviewed these plans and found that they were generally of good quality. They were structured with a [4P approach](#) – prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. They had clear audit trails and included reviews of actions.

**The NCA has a broad range of governance groups to co-ordinate a wide response to SOC**

Each SGG is supported by several governance groups. For example, the [child sexual abuse](#) and drugs SGGs are supported by pursue boards and prevent, protect and prepare boards. We observed several of these meetings, where board members gave relevant updates to the SGGs. We also reviewed a sample of minutes, which were generally of good quality.

These findings were consistent with our survey results. Overall, 86 percent of respondents rated the NCA’s governance as somewhat to extremely effective in leading the national response to SOC.

**Figure 4: Responses to how effective the governance of the NCA is in leading the national response to SOC**

<b>How effective is the governance of the NCA in leading this national response?</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
Extremely effective	4
Very effective	35
Somewhat effective	59
Not so effective	16
Not at all effective	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>

**Source: His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services NCA customer survey**

## **The NCA would benefit from improving the way it communicates with partners**

Despite the generally good governance structures at the NCA, some representatives of partner organisations told us they found it difficult to communicate effectively with the agency. They cited frequent changes of NCA leadership as a problem. For example, an interviewee told us that in one threat area, there had been four different deputy directors in eight months.

Some partners also told us that they found the NCA's structure complex, and that they often didn't know whether to contact the agency's senior leads for intelligence, threats or operations. NCA officers also told us that they struggled to identify the right people to contact within the agency, partly because it doesn't have an internal directory, which is surprising for an organisation of its size.

One senior ROCU officer told us: "Even the ROCC [the NCA's regional organised crime co-ordinator] struggles to get the right person, due to the number of teams and lack of clarity in responsibilities." They said that in some cases, the ROCC needed to go to five or six different teams before they found the appropriate contact. This causes delays.

The NCA acknowledges this problem. One senior NCA officer told us that partners found the NCA difficult to navigate. Another said the agency needed to do more to make sure partners could clearly understand the roles and identity of the NCA.

The NCA puts together the National Control Strategy. This strategy informs the strategic action plans for each threat area. However, we found that many partners didn't know about the agency's strategic action plans, or about how best to support them. For example, we found that five of the nine ROCUs didn't know about the strategic action plans for the different crime threat areas. Partners told us:

- there is a disconnect between the NCA's national threat leads and regional SGGs;
- they provided updates to the NCA but received limited feedback, so they weren't sure if their contributions were worthwhile; and
- the NCA declined to take some operations without explaining why.

Towards the end of our inspection, the NCA shared a paper with us that outlined how it proposed to improve engagement with policing. It planned to assign directors or deputy directors to regions across the UK. They would be responsible for regularly communicating with the chief constables and assistant chief constables who are responsible for SOC in their region. If the agency puts this plan in place effectively, it could help address the communication problems we identified during our inspection.

The NCA would also benefit from reviewing the way it communicates with other partner organisations within the SGG structures.

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