

Border patrol

Despite a remit to stem the flow of drugs into this country, Britain's version of the FBI stands accused of ignoring intelligence and shying away from tackling the smugglers. **Paul Lashmar** reports on a shaky first 18 months for SOCA.

As this year's ACPO drug conference gets under way in November, the vexed issue of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) will be a burning subject of discussion, albeit in private corners rather than in public.

Launched by Tony Blair as Britain's answer to the FBI, SOCA has now been operational for 18 months. Few disputed the need for a new 'joined up' approach to organised crime, but SOCA's operational policies have left many senior law enforcement officers, including many on its own staff, baffled.

SOCA, with a workforce of 4,400 and a budget of £4bn, took over the roles of National Crime Squad (NCS), National Crime Intelligence Service (NCIS) and the drugs investigation part of the Customs Investigation Service – absorbing many of the country's leading and experienced drug investigators. One of SOCA's tasks was to be the prime agency fighting drug smuggling into the UK.

There has been much controversy over SOCA, little of which has been made public. In fairness, SOCA has been riven with human resources problems not of its own making, and has had to sort out a myriad of office, rank, salary and pension structures and IT problems. But, as SOCA had been given 40 per cent of its budget, resources and manpower to tackle major drug importation, most people in law enforcement thought it would lead an aggressive attack on 'level three' drug trafficking into the UK. But instead, SOCA seems reluctant to engage head to head with major traffickers.

One of the most contentious areas has been drug intelligence 'referrals'. Customs (HMRC) may no longer have a proactive drugs investigation role, but by dint of monitoring of the borders where it still carries out seizures, Customs still get a lot of intelligence on drug trafficking. Customs need to pass on these intelligence 'referrals' to a proactive agency. My sources say that Customs bosses were astonished to find that SOCA was uninterested in these referrals, viewed by Customs as often containing 'pure gold' intelligence. Of the hundreds of referrals, SOCA only took a handful.

Here's one typical, small but telling example. During the summer a vehicle was stopped coming off a ferry from Holland at a British port. Suspicious Customs officers took the driver and passenger away for questioning. Meanwhile other officers found over 100kgs of heroin hidden in the vehicle.

Customs rang SOCA who they thought would be interested

in taking up the case and following the smugglers. But SOCA's 'Tasking and Co-ordination' section showed no interest as it did not apparently relate to any of SOCA's target criminals. Customs quickly pulled together a scratch surveillance team to follow the vehicle but were spotted.

It seems a large hole or vacuum in major drug investigation has opened up since SOCA began. As a result Customs have had to forge new links with local police forces. According to my sources a number of ACPO officers are asking what exactly SOCA is there for and why they swallow the level three budget. There has been some discussion about setting up Regional Crime Squads to fill the vacuum.

SOCA is unrepentant, but its mantra, that they are there to bring a fresh approach to law enforcement, is wearing thin for some. At the heart of their approach is a controversial 'intelligence led' focus on 130 'key criminals' which is SOCA's phrase for what the old NCS called 'core nominals'. Apparently SOCA is not interested in referrals unless they can be immediately linked to these key criminals.

One very senior former law enforcement officer told me: "The SOCA intelligence and operational focus on the known 130 and ignoring opportunities (from HMRC leads for example) to damage new large-scale criminals is one of the reasons why new crime groups can flourish in the UK. No doubt SOCA will seek to tackle them soon after each group has already caused severe damage and has grown in wealth and security so that taking them down is far more difficult."

The Concerted Inter-Agency Drugs Action (CIDA) group was set up in 2000/1 as an initiative by Customs and MI6 that brought all the other contributing agencies on board, including Home Office policy and Foreign Office overseas diplomacy. The aim was to reduce the availability of drugs in the UK and looked to do so by a range of complementary activities playing to the strengths of each agency. But SOCA is not interested in CIDA or those guidelines. Nor was it interested in a primacy agreement. But apparently HMRC kicked up such a stink that a primacy agreement is now being discussed.

So how much Class A is entering the UK? Estimating the amount of illegal drugs entering the country has always been problematic and equally estimating what percentage has been seized is also difficult. But rather like school league tables it might be a blunt instrument but it is the only measure we



Fast food: 45kg of cocaine found in rice sacks on its way onto UK streets from west Africa

have. One thing everyone agrees is that it is vital to have effective investigation of drug importation to deter flooding of the UK market.

Back in May when SOCA launched its first annual report it headlined on non-UK seizures producing a startling figure of 73 tonnes for cocaine, which was picked up unquestioningly by the rest of the media. In fairness it did not claim sole responsibility but partnership with international agencies. There is no supporting detail though. I knew that almost 20 tonnes of this amount had been seized by Royal Navy ships in the Atlantic often working with international partners. On behalf of the *Independent on Sunday* I asked SOCA to give some detail of where the other 55 tonnes was seized. After twelve days of procrastination they were 'unwilling' to say.

SOCA seems reluctant to engage head to head with major traffickers

In the past the benchmark of success has been UK seizures, arrests and organisations disrupted. SOCA did not even detail their UK seizure figures in their annual report. Why? Well they certainly were not impressive. I managed to prise out of SOCA that it had seized approximately 550 kilos of cocaine (450 kilos of that came in one seizure I'm told) and a similar amount of heroin.

Under CIDA there were very strict guidelines about seizure claims but SOCA says that CIDA is dead and it is not bound by these guidelines.

Since April 2006 we have to add SOCA's figure to HMRC's seizures to get the total UK seizures. HMRC's figures have just been released so we can see that a total of nearly three tonnes of cocaine seized in the UK (of which HRMC seized 2.3 tonnes) and just over a tonne of heroin which is about half SOCA and half HMRC. If you look at the recent annual totals it would seem that seizures have slowed down as SOCA has come into play. If you ignore 2003-2004 which was a particularly good year for Customs (20 tonnes of cocaine) and use the 2004-2005

figures these show 1.6 tonnes of heroin and 8.6 tonnes of cocaine seized – both better than the 2006-7 figures.

Now, none of this matters if the supply of Class A drugs into UK is constricted. But no one I know thinks this is the case. As early as March of this year David Burrowes, Conservative MP for Enfield, Southgate, who sat on a Conservative working group on addictions, warned: "There is a tide of drugs out on the streets. We need to know whether SOCA have taken their eye off the ball."

Martin Barnes, chief executive of DrugScope, told the *Daily Telegraph*: "The continued use of cocaine powder, particularly among young people, is of concern."

"We have highlighted the increased availability and affordability of powder cocaine, a drug which has both severe health risks and the potential for dependency."

Street prices are certainly very low. DrugScope's Harry Shapiro says that anyone who wants to buy Class A can get it. "Journalists ask me if the street prices are dropping and I say, 'How low do you want it to drop, when it is only £5 or £10 a bag?'"

DrugScope has recently identified cocaine sales are now in a two tier market. The first is a less adulterated cocaine aimed at wealthier users and the second, a more adulterated cocaine aimed at the economy market.

Sources suggest that there is so much heroin coming into the UK at the moment that importers are having trouble selling and that some has even been re-exported.

SOCA says that recent evidence shows that Class A drug use has levelled off. But is that true? SOCA's chairman Sir Stephen Lander has said that SOCA's approach is that of 'a marathon not a sprint' and that he has five years to prove SOCA's worth to Ministers. The Agency has no transparency or performance indicators and is veiled in MI5 style secrecy. Whether SOCA proves a success or failure remains to be seen.

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