

Press release: New prisons financial crime unit secures first bust

- Investigation by specialist prison service staff and police leads to seizure of almost £8,000
- Money suspected to be made from unlawful conduct in prison by a convicted murderer
- Unit is part of wider security drive to tackle organised crime and drugs which fuel violence in prisons

The Financial Investigations Unit froze the bank account of a convicted murderer at HMP Gartree containing almost £8,000 and, following an investigation, seized the assets. The prisoner was thought to be involved in unlawful activity within the prison.

This seizure is a first for the unit, which was created last year as part of a wider effort to disrupt the organised crime in prisons which fuels drug use and violence.

The unit is made up of specially-trained prison service analysts and police financial investigators who use intelligence to identify bank accounts used for illicit transactions. They have the power to freeze bank accounts and make arrests.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

Last year I announced a new specialist unit to seize the assets of prisoners who commit crime and fuel violence in jail, and I am pleased it has achieved its first success.

This unit forms an important part of our wider strategy to tackle organised crime and restore stability to prisons so that offenders have the chance to turn their lives around.

Organised criminals in prisons have been known to operate money laundering schemes to receive payment for illicit debts, often as a result of drug deals. Much of the activity takes place through single low-value transactions, making them difficult to find.

Bank accounts on the outside world, used by inmates to pay for drugs, are usually identified through paper notes found in cells which contain account details, or on phones seized from prisoners with instructions to make transfers. Such transactions, which amount to money laundering, are targeted by the unit.

In this case the unit identified a key bank account belonging to an offender,

a convicted murderer, that had received a number of suspicious deposits.

The unit will continue to analyse intelligence and work quickly to act against offenders suspected of criminal activity.

It is part of a wider effort to restore stability to the prison estate, including an additional £70 million investment in safety, security and decency. This will ensure prisons can be places of rehabilitation where offenders can turn their backs on crime for good.

The investment includes £16 million to improve conditions and £6 million on new security measures, such as airport-style security, improved searching techniques, and phone-blocking technology. To help identify, disrupt and disable gangs, £1m went towards the roll-out of a new digital tool which assesses information from various law enforcement databases to create a central 'risk rating' for each prisoner.

In addition to this, £14 million is being invested each year to stop criminal gangs smuggling drugs into prisons.

This has come against a backdrop of rising prison officer numbers, with more than 4,300 additional officers recruited since October 2016 and staffing levels at their highest since 2012.

Notes to editors:

- A total sum of £7,938.99 was seized.
- The assets will be shared between the Home Office and Eastern Region Special Operations Unit (ERSOU) forces.
- The unit is based in Peterborough and has been operational since October. It consists of Intelligence Analysts within Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and financial investigators from the ERSOU.
- ERSOU are the lead Regional Organised Crime Unit for the Eastern Region.
- Sanctions range from the closure of accounts, to freezing assets or other criminal sanctions such as Confiscation Orders and arrest.
- For investigative reasons we are not able to identify the prisoner or provide further details.