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Proceeds of crime: £46m recovered in Wales from criminals

By Nick Bourne
BBC News

Over £46m in criminals' cash and assets has been recovered in the last decade by police and other agencies in Wales.

Police and crime commissioners (PCCs) say the use of the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) to claw back cash from offenders ensures "crime doesn't pay".

Assets seized include cash, buildings, cars and jewellery.

The figures obtained by BBC Wales come as the PCCs look at the way the money is spent, with Plaid MP Elfyn Llwyd urging more for drug rehabilitation.

Home Office figures obtained by BBC Wales show £46m was recovered in Wales out of £77m in orders issued in the 10 years since POCA came into force.

Det Chf Insp Lian Penhale from Wales Regional Asset Recovery Team said recovery was an on-going process which can take years.

"Some career criminals see a prison sentence as a hazard of their job but what they don't like is when we then take those assets," she said.

"We strip them of their houses, their cars, the lifestyle that they've enjoyed off the back of the misery and harm they have caused to the community through their criminality."

Since 2004 an incentive scheme was set up to award organisations like the police and local councils a proportion of money they recover.

Figures obtained by BBC Wales shows £7.3m was shared by the four forces:

South Wales Police £3.7m
North Wales £1.6m
Gwent £1.3m
Dyfed-Powys £632,000.

The bulk of the money recovered goes to the Home Office with the remainder split between the different agencies involved in recovering the money.

Some of the newly appointed PCCs in Wales are looking at ways to maximise the use of the forces' portion of the cash.

Elfyn Llwyd, Plaid Cymru MP for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, a barrister who sits on the Justice Select Committee, suggested money could be targeted towards fighting drugs.

"I believe that the money that's being retained by Welsh police forces is being used in a wise manner" he said.

"I think there will be an extra impetus now we have police and crime commissioners to assist in where to invest these monies.

"However, I would like to see a greater concentration on drugs rehabilitation and the reason I say that is that 66% plus of all property crime before the crown courts has an element of drug dependency in it or some form of drug use."

Dyfed-Powys PCC Christopher Salmon said: "Over the years the force has seized a significant amount of money and assets and a proportion has been used to fund good causes in our communities throughout Dyfed Powys.

"I want to further build on this good work.

"I will be creating a commissioner's fund to distribute the proceeds of crime in Dyfed Powys in future. I want this in place for the next financial year 2013/14.

Value of cash and assets recovered using the POCA by Welsh police forces

Force area	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Dyfed-Powys	£342,967	£199,882	£439,464
Gwent	£960,542	£816,287	£429,252
North Wales	£700,624	£1,760,081	£604,278
South Wales	£1,804,802	£1,721,497	£1,468,671

SOURCE: HOME OFFICE

"I'm still working on the fine detail but I'm keen that local police officers, partner agencies and the public all have an opportunity to have a say in where they think the money can be best spent in our communities."

There is a plan to offer good causes in the Gwent force area a bigger share of the money as well as using it to fight crime.

Gwent PCC Ian Johnston said: "Monies we get are welcome in a time of budget constraints and that is ploughed back into chasing after other major criminals," he said.

And a total of 29 organisations received funding using the cash in north Wales last year, according to the PCC Winston Roddick, a former judge.

South Wales PCC Alun Michael said: "Taking the profit out of crime is the best way to turn the slogan 'crime doesn't pay' into a reality, and losing assets gained through crime can have an even greater impact than direct punishment imposed.

"I will be taking a keen interest in this and work with the chief constable to maximise the returns and beneficial use of assets seized.

"It's not a simple matter to deal with, especially as the hiding of assets is often a highly professional activity, but one we need to get on top of."

Specialist police officers are involved in a number of regional asset and recovery teams (RART) around the UK which also includes criminal lawyers and tax investigators among others.

And the four Welsh forces also pursue their own investigations.

"The measure of success in cash terms is not how much you have got back but the fact that the amount, however small, is not available to the criminal," said Ian Davidson, national co-ordinator for the financial investigation and proceeds of crime portfolio run by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

Part of his role is to manage the work of the country's RARTs and he says their main role is assessing intelligence based on threat, "not on the basis of whether they will get any cash back".

Mr Davidson said: "The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 has been used increasingly over the last 10 years but there is no doubt we could do more.

"However, you need to recognise that for the police this is just one part of their job and they have many tasks to undertake so there are

significant pressures on all resources including financial investigation.

"In terms of the reuse of funds there is no doubt that we need to continue to ensure the funds are put to good use," he said.

The Home Office told BBC Wales £165m in criminal assets were seized under POCA last year and reinvested into helping tackle crime.

"We work closely with all agencies involved and whilst we think the current arrangements are appropriate, we keep the system under review to ensure the funds are used as effectively as possible," said a spokesperson.

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