

'Billy Whizz' EncroChat gang moved nearly £500,000 of speed

They traded amphetamine branded with pictures of The Beano character

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By [Neil Docking](#) Crown Court Reporter

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 **Amphetamine marked up with pictures of The Beano character Billy Whizz traded by an EncroChat drug gang based in St Helens** (Image: Liverpool Echo)

An EncroChat drug gang moved nearly £500,000 of amphetamine branded with pictures of The Beano character Billy Whizz.



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Photos of the drug ready for supply show blocks were packaged up with images of the fictional boy who can run extraordinarily fast.

[North West Regional Organised Crime Unit \(NWROCU\)](#) detectives busted the gang after launching an undercover surveillance operation into its activities in February 2020.

NWROCU said the investigation revealed what proved to be a "large-scale drug dealing business with connections around the UK".

But it was **[EncroChat](#)** messages, recovered in April 2020 as part of the **[hack of the encrypted mobile phone network beloved by gangsters](#)**, which provided officers with the additional evidence they needed to blow the lid on the drug dealing network.

Ricardo Hughes, who went by the EncroChat handle "NovaCoast", David Hunter, and Christopher Dooley, aka "OctoOx", were identified as key players in the plot, supplying both Class A cocaine and Class B amphetamine across the UK.

Meanwhile, Hunter was also conspiring with others to supply ketamine, another Class B controlled drug.

The gang bought and sold more than 49kg of amphetamine, worth up to £490,000, between February 2020 and March 2021.

Six members of the group, including Hughes, Hunter and Dooley, were sentenced at **[Liverpool Crown Court](#)** on Friday.



Amphetamine marked up with pictures of The Beano character Billy Whizz traded by an EncroChat drug gang based in St Helens (Image: Liverpool Echo)

Hughes, 53, of Rock Lane, **Widnes**, who organised the handover of drugs between third parties and the gang, was jailed for 10 and a half years for conspiring to supply Class A and B drugs.

Hunter, 48, of Larch Close, Billinge, St Helens, who was thought to play a leading role in the crime group, was sentenced to nine years and seven months for conspiring to supply Class A and B drugs.

Dooley, 35, of no fixed address near St Helens, said to be a "trusted lieutenant", was jailed for nine years for conspiring to supply Class A and B drugs.

A fourth man, "trusted courier" Stephen Piert, 27, of Harlow Close, St Helens, who moved amphetamine for the gang, was jailed for two years and seven months for conspiring to supply Class B drugs.

Another courier who transported amphetamines across the UK, Neal Rodgers, 36, of Howar Street, Thatto Heath, St Helens, was handed 12 months in prison, suspended for two years, with 150 hours of unpaid work, for being concerned in the supply of Class B drugs.

Paul Lever, 33, of Hauxwell Grove, St Helens, who managed the gang's "safehouse", was sentenced to 12 months in jail, suspended for two years.



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 **Ricardo Hughes, 53, of Rock Lane, Widnes** (Image: Liverpool Echo)

He was also hit with 150 hours of unpaid work and a 15-day Rehabilitation Activity Requirement for conspiring to supply Class B drugs.

All six men pleaded guilty to the drugs offences at a hearing earlier this year at the same court.

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 **Christopher Dooley, 35, of no fixed address but from St Helens** (Image: Liverpool Echo)

"The guilty pleas put forward by these criminals were as a result of the overwhelming evidence put before the court.

"Surveillance evidence in conjunction with EncroChat data allowed us to identify and prove the criminal activities of each of the defendants.



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Amphetamines including speed are a group of stimulant drugs used by people to stay awake, energised and alert.

They are usually sold as an off-white or pinkish powder, which sometimes looks like small crystals.

A speed 'comedown' can last for days and some people say they feel exhausted and sad after taking it.

There is also a risk when using a range of stimulant drugs at the same time, because this can put your heart under a lot of stress.



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 **David Hunter, 48, of Larch Close, Billinge, St Helens** (Image: Liverpool Echo)

The ECHO has previously reported how **the use of amphetamines has seen a sharp rise in Merseyside**, as figures revealed it is one of the most popular drugs in the region, after cannabis.

Merseyside Police seized 20 times more amphetamines in 2019/20 compared with the year before.

The figures suggested the stimulants - which include speed - have replaced cocaine as the r popular drug in the area, apart from cannabis.

The latest figures from the Home Office revealed a total of 88kg of amphetamines were seized by police in Merseyside in 2019/20 - up massively from 4kg seized the year before.



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 **Stephen Piert, 27, of Harlow Close, St Helens** (Image: Liverpool Echo)

That's enough for nearly 1.8 million typical 50mg "doses" of amphetamines - or more than one for every person living in Merseyside.



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