



SAFERWORLD POLICING HELPDESK

United Kingdom Security Services

There are three main components to the intelligence/security services in the United Kingdom (UK):

- **The Security Service (MI5)** is responsible for protecting the UK against threats to national security such as those emanating from terrorism, espionage and sabotage, from the activities of agents of foreign powers, and from actions intended to overthrow or undermine parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.¹
- **The Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)** is primarily responsible for gathering intelligence outside the UK in support of the Government's security, defence and foreign and economic policies.
- **Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ)** is a security and intelligence organisation which mainly deals with interception and monitoring of communications.

All three services are supported by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC).

JTAC analyses and assesses all intelligence relating to international terrorism, at home and overseas. It sets threat levels and issues warnings of threats and other terrorist-related subjects for a wide range of government departments and agencies, as well as producing more in-depth reports on trends, terrorist networks and the capabilities of groups and organisations as well as their level of threat to the UK.

JTAC brings together counterterrorist expertise from the police and other key government departments and agencies. This collaboration ensures that information is analysed and processed on a shared basis, with the involvement and consensus of all relevant departments. The threat level dictates how a range of organisations carry out their work. For example, during periods of severe threat, the police tend to step up visible patrolling in public spaces, set up vehicle check points and brief key industries about precautionary measures, and the National Crime Agency and Borders and Customs organisations also increase their presence and activities. The covert intelligence services similarly raise their level of activity under such circumstances, but this usually goes unnoticed by the public.

The entire security budget is paid from the single intelligence account (SIA). The accounting officer for the SIA is the Prime Minister's Security Adviser and Head of Intelligence, Security

¹ <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/what-we-do.html>

and Resilience. He advises the Prime Minister on coordinating the UK's intelligence machinery. He also advises on intelligence requirements and plans for assessing the performance of the security and intelligence agencies.

The SIA's budget provision is decided by Ministers through the spending review mechanism which determines the budgets for all government departments. Those arrangements are designed to enable Ministers to decide the amount to spend on security and intelligence, in line with decisions on the overall level and allocation of government spending. No individual breakdown of spend is available to the public for each of the security services. However, the involvement of ministers in allocating funding at least provides some degree of accountability.

Oversight of the security services

Mechanisms for oversight are broadly that the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, is responsible for all of the security institutions. MI5 is accountable via the Home Secretary and MI6 via the Foreign Secretary. Other mechanisms for oversight relate to the type of work these institutions are involved in. Within the UK, there is a network of oversight commissions for a variety of functions. For example, the Surveillance Commissioner looks at compliance with the 'Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act' and the Independent Reviewer of Terrorist Legislation advises the government on issues such as the compliance by the police and security services to this legislation and on amendments to it.

The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament gathers Members of Parliament (MPs) from across the main political parties as well as the different parliament houses. It was set up in 1995 to review the expenditure, administration and policy of all three of the security services. However, the nature of this committee limits its powers. There is an ongoing debate within the UK regarding the level of scrutiny of the security services. For more details see the following links: <https://www.privacyinternational.org/?q=node/352> and <http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=2020>.

As internal security is the responsibility of MI5 rather than MI6, the remainder of this document will focus on the former of these two organisations.

The Security Service, MI5

Created in 1909, MI5 has been responsible for countering threats to national security and providing security advice to a range of other organisations. MI5 has its headquarters in London, eight regional offices around the UK and a headquarter office in Northern Ireland. The Service is organised into various branches, each with specific areas of responsibility, including terrorism, espionage, cyber and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Originally part of the Ministry of Defence, it was the 5th Branch and was referred to as MO5. During the First World War, it moved across to a newly formed unit within the War Office called Military Intelligence and became 'MI5'. It kept its appellation despite subsequent changes in its role and parent department.

The organisation is headed by a Director General who answers to the Home Secretary (similar to an Interior Minister) and is responsible for the overall running of the

organisation. The Management Board of the Service is made up by the Director General, the Deputy Director General, the Assistant Director General, the Directors and the Legal Advisor. The Board decides how the priorities and organisation of the service should adapt to reflect changes to the threats. Please refer to the organisational chart at the end of this document for more details.

MI5 currently employs around 3,900 people. 40% of staff are women, 55% are less than 40 years old.² The main investigative, assessment, policy and management work is carried out by generalist staff, who account for about two-thirds of total staff. They are then supported by a range of specialists in languages, technology, surveillance, IT, communications, protective security, administration and building services.

While MI5's activities have a certain amount of secrecy attached to them, as is the case with any national security organisation, at least some information about the service is publicly available. The website www.mi5.gov.uk/home.html provides information on the structure and role of MI5 and also contains a varied list of 'frequently asked questions'. This approach is in line with the UK Government's 'openness and transparency agenda'. A copy of the UK National Security Strategy is also available online.³

The role of MI5

The role of MI5 is set out in the [Security Services Act](#) 1989 as 'the protection of national security'. However, neither UK nor European law specifically defines the term 'national security'. This allows for flexibility and interpretation, which some claim is necessary to respond to quickly changing threats. However, critics see this as allowing for intrusion and mission creep.

As a matter of government policy, national security is taken to refer to the security and well-being of the UK as a whole. The 'nation' in this sense is not confined to the UK as a geographical or political entity but extends to its citizens, wherever they may be. This has also raised controversial issues, including allegations by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that British security services are either colluding in torture⁴ or outsourcing such activities by working through security services in other states, for example Pakistan.⁵ British authorities continually deny such allegations.

The security service's statutory remit was extended in 1996 through legislation to include supporting law enforcement agencies in their work against serious and organised crime. This role is reactive, as MI5 acts at the request of law enforcement bodies such as the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS).

The focus of MI5 since its inception during the First World War has evolved through Second

² Source UK Home Office Website

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61936/national-security-strategy.pdf

⁴ It is a specific offence under the Criminal Justice Act 1988 for British officials to instigate or consent to the inflicting of severe pain or suffering on any person, anywhere in the world, or even to acquiesce in such treatment. Any such offence can be punished by life imprisonment.

⁵ The Guardian, Tuesday 15 July 2008:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/15/humanrights.civilliberties/print>

World War and Cold War dynamics, and has more recently been on investigating Irish republican activity within Britain and increasing the effort countering other forms of terrorism, notably the threat of Islamic extremism in recent times.

MI5's involvement in the Northern Ireland conflict:

Despite having provided support in the countering of both Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s, British security forces have been accused of collusion with Loyalists. A 2006 Irish government committee inquiry found that there was widespread collusion between British security forces and loyalist terrorists in the 1970s, which resulted in eighteen deaths. In 2012, a legal review by Sir Desmond de Silva QC into the 1989 murder of Belfast solicitor Patrick Finucane found that MI5, along with British Military intelligence and Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch, had colluded in furthering and facilitating his death. MI5 had the overall supervision of the intelligence gathering in Northern Ireland during the conflict and it was revealed through a secret MI5 document that in 1985, 85% of the Ulster Defence Association's (an illegal Loyalist paramilitary organisation) intelligence came from security forces sources.⁶ Prime Minister David Cameron accepted the findings, apologised on behalf of the British government and acknowledged significant levels of collusion with Loyalists in its state agencies.

The functioning of MI5

Where there is a reasonable belief that a threat exists, an investigation to determine the reality of this threat is undertaken. Ultimately, the decision on whether the threat exists falls on ministers, based on evidence and intelligence provided by the Security Service. If it is agreed that a threat does exist and is serious, MI5 works with the police and other agencies to counter it. MI5 does not get involved simply because there is a threat to people, it works for national security specifically, unlike the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States (US), which is a criminal investigative body.

MI5 investigate suspect individuals and organisations to obtain, collate, analyse and assess secret intelligence relating to the threats identified, including by working with organisations outside the UK. While it gathers and analyses publicly available information, often referred to as 'open source', it also engages a range of covert tactics to gather secret intelligence. These include the use of communication intercepts, bugging devices, trackers and human intelligence sources (agents and informants). Usually, MI5 remains in the background, fulfilling an intelligence gathering role while the executive actions, such as arrests, are carried out by the Special Branch, which is the anti-terrorist branch of the British police service.

MI5 is also involved in compiling evidence to enable prosecutions. Security Service officers have, on occasions, given evidence as witnesses, in cases where they work alongside the police. These tend to be in the context of counterterrorist or serious and organised crime. Given the secret nature of the Security Service, the officers' identity is protected within the court.

⁶ Reference to 'security forces' is a collective term to include all state agencies operating in N. Ireland: Police, Military, Intelligence, etc.

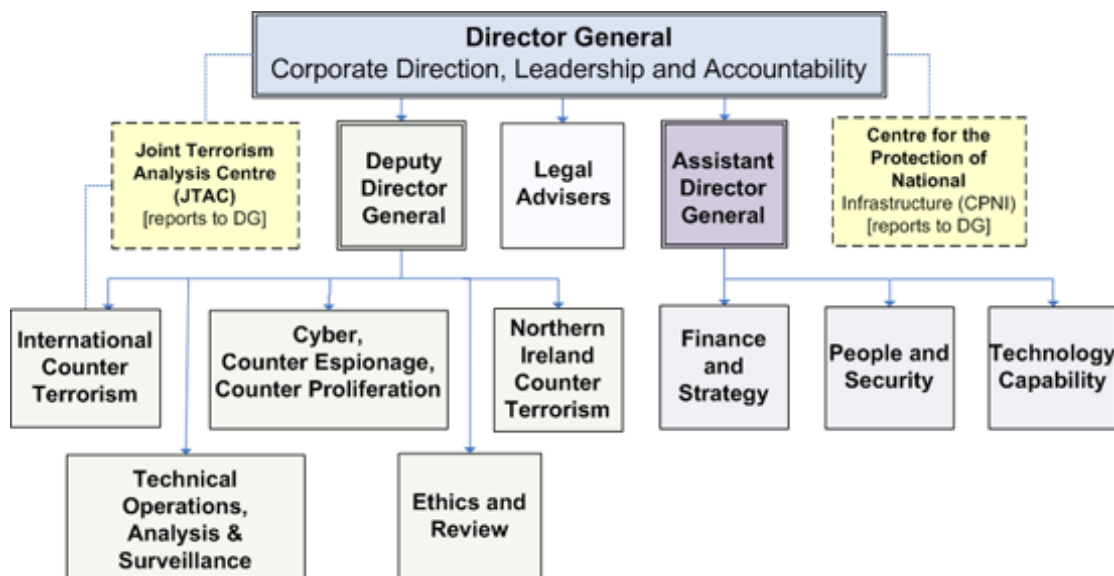
Executive liaison groups enable MI5 to safely share secret, sensitive, and often raw intelligence with the police, on which decisions can be made about how best to gather evidence and prosecute suspects in the courts. Each organisation works in partnership throughout the investigation, but MI5 retains the lead for collecting, assessing and exploiting intelligence. The police takes lead responsibility for gathering evidence, obtaining arrests and preventing risks to the public.

Polemic use of information by MI5

As with any other intelligence agency, the recruitment of informers is controversial. Allegations are common that MI5 is currently targeting young Muslim men by interfering with their visas and travel status.⁷ Historical allegations include MI5 covering up child abuse in Northern Ireland to facilitate the recruitment of informers.⁸ Communications surveillance is likely to mirror in extent the type of activities exposed by the American whistle blower Edward Snowden.⁹

In July 2006, a UK parliamentarian accused the British Government of ‘hoarding information about people who pose no danger to this country’ after it emerged that MI5 holds secret files on 272,000 individuals, which corresponds to one in 160 adults¹⁰. They are also alleged to have access to one of the most extensive CCTV networks in the world, which includes nearly 4.2 million cameras.¹¹

Organisational structure of MI5



⁷ The Independent Thursday 21 May 2009: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/exclusive-how-mi5-blackmails-british-muslims-1688618.html>

⁸ <http://rt.com/uk/247785-mi5-coverup-child-abuse/>

⁹ <http://www.biography.com/people/edward-snowden-21262897#aftermath>

¹⁰ Ronals A Marks (2010) ‘Spying in America in the post 9/11 World’

¹¹ BBC News Thursday 2 November 2006: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6108496.stm>