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HOME OFFICE GUIDELINES ON THE WORK OF A SPECIAL BRANCH

Status and organisation

Each of the police forces in England and Wales has its own Special Branch. Except for the Metropolitan Police Special Branch which has responsibilities in relation to Irish Republican extremism and terrorism throughout Great Britain, the responsibility of each Special Branch relates only to the area of the force of which it is a part.

2. All members of a Special Branch are responsible to the chief officer of the force through the head of the Branch and any intervening supervisory ranks in the force structure.

Specific functions

3. The specific functions listed below comprise those tasks which will most commonly fall to be undertaken by the force Special Branch. However, in some force areas, it may be necessary or desirable for some of these functions to be undertaken by other parts of the force CID or a specialist unit. It will be an operational matter for each chief officer to decide how best to utilise his resources within the force Special Branch.

4. The work of a Special Branch arises from the chief officer's responsibility for the preservation of the Queen's Peace. Its work is to assist the chief officer in discharging this responsibility.

5. A Special Branch gathers information about threats to public order. Such information will enable the Branch to provide assessments of whether marches, meetings, demonstrations and pickets pose any threat to public order and help the chief officer to determine an appropriate level of policing.

6. A Special Branch assists the Security Service in carrying out its tasks of defending the Realm against attempts at espionage and sabotage or from the actions of persons and organisations whether directed from within or without the country which may be judged to be subversive to the State. A large part of this effort is devoted to the study and investigation of terrorism, including the activities of international terrorists and terrorist organisations.

7. A Special Branch provides information about extremists and terrorist groups to the Security Service (or, in the case of Irish Republican extremists and terrorist groups, to the Metropolitan Police Special Branch).

8. A Special Branch assists in the application of the Travel Notification Scheme for diplomats and officials.

9. Special Branch officers may provide armed personal protection for certain people who are judged to be at risk. Particular attention should be paid to anyone who may plan to harm prominent individuals for political reasons or because of mental disturbance.

10. At airports and seaports, Special Branch officers

- arrest wanted criminals
- detect offences
- gather information relating to their other functions and other criminal matters
- act as examining officers under the legislation on the prevention of terrorism

11. On behalf of the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office, a Special Branch may be asked to carry out naturalisation enquiries, and may assist with immigration enquiries as well as deal with the registration of foreign nationals. A Special Branch may also be involved in prosecutions related to these matters. In practice much of the routine work in these areas may be undertaken by other parts of the force; the appropriate organisational structure will be determined by the size of the force and the number and nature of these enquiries.

12. A Special Branch should enquire into the implications of any offence connected with firearms and explosives unless it is immediately clear that there is no security interest. It may be advisable to include in force orders an instruction that Special Branch be informed immediately of all such cases coming to the notice of the police.

Relations with others

13. The Metropolitan Police Special Branch is responsible for the assessment of intelligence about Irish Republican extremism and terrorism in Great Britain.

Each Special Branch, under the direction of its chief officer, helps the Metropolitan Police Special Branch in discharging this function.

14. The Metropolitan Police has certain national responsibilities for the provision of personal protection to members of the Royal Family, Ministers of the Crown, former Ministers, diplomats and other people at risk. Where a Special Branch has protection duties which are connected with the matters which are the responsibility of the Metropolitan Police, the local Special Branch and the Metropolitan Police Special Branch or Royalty and Diplomatic Protection Department work in close liaison with each other.

15. The National Joint Unit at New Scotland Yard, which is staffed by officers from Metropolitan and provincial Special Branches, co-ordinates enquiries and applications from police forces in Great Britain concerning people held under prevention of terrorism legislation. The Unit processes, for onward transmission to the Home Office or the Scottish Home and Health Department as the case may be, applications for extension of detention and exclusion orders under the legislation and co-ordinates the preparation of up-to-date assessments in connection with the review of exclusion cases. The National Ports Office, based at Heathrow Airport, provides a liaison and advisory service for ports units in other force areas.

Records

16. Records should be maintained in order to discharge effectively the functions listed in paragraphs 3-12 above. It is important, however, because of the particular sensitivity of the information concerned, that only information relevant to those functions should be recorded. Close attention should therefore be paid to paragraphs 3-12, and to the definitions given in paragraph 20, in deciding what information should be recorded or not recorded. Data on individuals or organisations should not under any circumstances be collected or held solely on the basis that such a person or organisation supports unpopular causes or on the basis of race or creed.

17. It is also important to ensure that, wherever possible, information recorded about an individual is authenticated and does not give a false or misleading impression. Care should be taken to ensure that only necessary and relevant information is recorded and retained. Each Special Branch should therefore

maintain an effective system both for updating information where necessary and for weeding out and destroying information which can no longer be clearly related to the discharge of its functions.

18. Access to information held by Special Branch should be strictly limited to those who have a particular need to know. Under no circumstances should information be passed to commercial firms or to employers' organisations.

19. The security of records maintained by Special Branch is of paramount importance. Because of the sensitivity of the information concerned and because of the damage to individuals which might result if unauthorised persons were to gain access to it, or if improper use were made of the information, Special Branches must ensure that the most stringent and appropriate precautions are taken to safeguard the information and to protect it against both unauthorised access or disclosure and accidental loss.

Definitions

20. Espionage - Covert or illegal attempts to acquire information or materials in order to assist a foreign power.

Sabotage - An act falling short of a military operation, or an omission, intended to cause physical damage in order to assist a hostile foreign power, or to further a subversive political aim.

Terrorism - The use of violence for political ends, including any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear.

Subversion - Subversive activities are those which threaten the safety or well being of the State, and which are intended to undermine or overthrow Parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.

Home Office

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