



Matt Western MP  
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security  
Strategy  
House of Commons  
London  
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16 April 2025

Dear Chair,

**Response to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) letter**

I am writing in reply to your letter of 28 March, regarding the Committee's 17 March evidence session and the Government's work on defending democracy.

**Protective security arrangements**

*During the session, you committed to respond with further details about Operation Bridger and Operation Ford. We would also be grateful for further details on:*

**1. What is your assessment of the success of these measures?**

Under the previous Government in February 2024, an additional £31 million of funding was allocated to strengthen protective security measures for MPs and locally elected representatives. Part of this funding was used to expand Operation Bridger.

Operation Bridger is a network of police officers, embedded in police forces across the UK, to provide MPs with a local point of contact on security matters. The Operation Bridger network worked hard to support all candidates during last year's General Election, however, some MPs have had less positive experiences and have pointed out that the support and guidance provided by Bridger officers is inconsistent across the UK.

In early April 2025, I wrote to all Chief Constables to ask that they ensure their Bridger provision is responsive and consistent across the UK. The Home Office will continue to work with the Operation Bridger network, including with its national coordinator, to ensure Bridger is as effective as possible.

As part of the announcement, a commitment was made to protect locally elected representatives (Councillors (Mid-Tier – Unitary, County, District), Police and Crime Commissioners and Mayors) through an expansion of Operation Bridger. This expansion is known operationally as Operation Ford, which enhances and complements Bridger. Operation Ford officers have been proactive in the lead up to May's local elections, engaging local councils, their councillors, Returning Officers and officials to provide those involved in those elections with support and guidance.

In addition to the above, the Home Office funded and successfully introduced a private security capability, known as Operation Regency, which was available to all candidates for General Election-related events.

**2. At what points from December 2023 did sitting MPs and prospective candidates receive communications regarding the physical and cyber security offerings?**

The 2024 United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) was called on 23 May; candidates were confirmed on 7 June.

From December 2023, the Home Office sent, and fed into, a range of communications regarding protective security communications. The communications were shared with sitting MPs and candidates, as well as being available on open-source websites to ensure that information was accessible for all. These include:

- From November 2023, the Parliamentary Security Department (PSD) offered security advice briefings to sitting Members of Parliament; this offer was available up until the dissolution of Parliament.
- During January 2024, the National Protective Security Authority (NPSA), the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and the National Authority for Counter-Eavesdropping (NACE) held webinars aimed at communicating best security practice to candidates.
- On 11 March, the former Elections Minister hosted a security webinar aimed at Returning Officers and on 25 March there was a Q&A Follow-up.
- From 13 March, updated security advice was available to all potential candidates on the Candidate Security Guidance Collection<sup>1</sup> on GOV.UK.
- On 15 April, the National Protective Security Authority published a Security Video for Election Candidates<sup>2</sup>, which provides safety and security advice. The video includes a QR code which shares detailed advice and guidance from relevant websites with users.
- On 25 April, the Home Office led the Defending Democracy Taskforce Cross-Party Meeting. This meeting provided an update on General Election preparedness, including plans for protective security arrangements for candidates.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/candidate-security-guidance-collection>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyY1OFbnsy4>

- On 23 May, in advance of Parliament dissolving, the PSD provided specific Dissolution Guidance. This provided information to sitting MPs on security measures available during the upcoming pre-election period.
- Multiple communications and meetings with Returning Officers, to highlight the protective security offer available for candidates, via the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government 'General Election Special Bulletin'. The Operation Regency offer was specifically shared with Returning Officers on 24<sup>th</sup> May.
- In May, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), The Electoral Commission (EC), the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the College of Policing collaborated on the Joint Guidance for Candidates in Elections<sup>3</sup>, which was published on the EC website. This provided information on the process for candidates to follow to gain contact with their Operation Bridger single point of contact.
- A number of Government departments collaborated on Candidate Guidance for General Election<sup>4</sup>; this was shared by the EC. The guidance was regularly updated, providing political parties and candidates with information relating to Operation Bridger and Operation Regency.
- On 4 June, the EC published an 'Information Bulletin' to all registered Political Parties. This included guidance signposting the protective security offer and a reminder to attend a police-led candidate safety briefing.
- At the start of June, the Home Office engaged directly with the Labour Party and Conservative Party to make them aware of the protective security offer available for candidates.
- On 10 June, the Home Office, Cabinet Office, Department for Science Innovation and Technology, National Cyber Security Centre, NPCC, the EC, CPS, College of Policing, National Counter Terrorism Security Office, Counter Terrorism Policing, National Protective Security Authority and the UK National Authority for Counter-Eavesdropping published an updated Candidate Security Guidance Collection<sup>5</sup>. This included guidance relating to protective security, cyber security and information security.
- On 14 June, three Operation Bridger National Security Briefings took place and all candidates could attend. A representative from the Home Office participated and a recording of one of the National Briefings was made available to local forces.

All guidance and security products were regularly signposted to political parties and candidates before and during the pre-election period via Returning Officers and the Electoral Commission.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/Joint%20Guidance%20for%20Candidates%20in%20Elections%202024%20English.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://docs.maidstone.gov.uk/elections-2024/general-election-2024/Candidate-guidance-for-General-Election.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/candidate-security-guidance-collection>

### **3. How many candidates took these up?**

Guidance was issued to all candidates ahead of the General Election to help improve their personal, cyber and online security. The Candidate Security Guidance Collection page on GOV.UK contains key information including from the police and Electoral Commission. This guidance was most recently updated ahead of the upcoming local elections.

Requests for Home Office-provided private security was considered based on risk and threat. The Home Office provided private security, via Operation Regency, for 532 events to a total of 206 candidates during the General Election.

In addition, 1084 individuals attended the security briefings delivered by Operation Bridger police officers across the UK; however, I must caveat that candidates may have asked representatives to attend briefings on their behalf.

### **4. Given there were many candidates standing at the election for independent parties, or selected at a late stage, how did agencies ensure candidates were engaged with and people were not missed?**

In line with the Defending Democracy Policing Protocol<sup>6</sup>, the Home Office made available a protective security offer to all candidates during the 2024 General Election. This included the enhancement of Operation Bridger and the creation of Operation Regency.

The various communication approaches and products were intended to reach all General Election candidates, no matter whether they were running on behalf of a political party, or as an independent.

## **The Defending Democracy Taskforce's relationship with social media firms**

### **5. Please could you list the social media firms with which the Government has engaged as part of its counter-disinformation preparations for the General Election? Are you satisfied with all of their responses and efforts?**

The Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT) is responsible for HMG's strategic relationship with social media platforms and engagement in relation to mis- and disinformation. DSIT engaged productively with all the major social media platforms (X, YouTube/Google, Meta, and TikTok) in the run-up to and during the 2024 general election period. Discussions focused on what action platforms were taking on mis- and disinformation and aimed to ensure a robust response to content that could undermine the election.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defending-democracy-policing-protocol/defending-democracy-policing-protocol>

Engagement with social media platforms included information sharing meetings to discuss key trends and narratives and ad hoc referrals of content assessed as likely to breach their terms of service.

Platforms appeared to proactively enforce their terms of service and also largely engaged constructively and quickly with referrals. Where content was referred, the next steps for dealing with that lay solely with the platform, and DSIT could not require platforms to remove content.

We are seeking to build on that positive engagement in preparation for the upcoming local elections. While the primary responsibility for harmful social media content rests with those individuals and groups who create and post it, social media platforms also have a responsibility to keep users safe. As more of the Online Safety Act's duties become enforceable, our message is clear that social media platforms should act now – rather than wait for legislation to take effect.

### **The Defending Democracy Taskforce's role in co-ordinating efforts to tackle foreign interference**

*During the session, you set out the Taskforce's role as a "fulcrum point" for Government activity and agreed to revert back with further details about its work. In addition:*

#### **6. What is the relationship between the Taskforce, Cabinet Office and the National Security Council?**

The Taskforce reports to the Prime Minister via the National Security Council (NSC). The Taskforce is a decision-making forum, but the NSC is used to secure collective agreement, where required. Ministers and officials from the Cabinet Office are part of the Taskforce's core membership and attend each Taskforce meeting. The National Security Secretariat within the Cabinet Office leads on the issue of foreign interference and updates on this work into the Taskforce.

#### **7. How often does the ministerial grouping of the Taskforce typically meet?**

The Taskforce has met three times at Ministerial level since the 2024 General Election. Ministerial meetings are complemented by regular meetings of senior officials and ad hoc Ministerial small group meetings to discuss specific areas of work.

**8. *What involvement does HM Treasury have in the Taskforce? And what are the mechanisms for ensuring that major decisions around economic partnerships are taken with reference to wider national security concerns – such as those presumably documented by the China Audit?***

HM Treasury is not a standing member of the Taskforce. However, the departments and agencies represented at the Taskforce engage with the Treasury as required.

The Cabinet Office, which is a standing member of the Taskforce, is responsible for the operation of the National Security and Investment Act (NSIA). The NSIA gives the government powers to scrutinise and intervene in business transactions, such as takeovers, to protect national security, while providing businesses and investors with the certainty and transparency they need to do business in the UK.

**9. *What is the mechanism for the China Audit findings to influence the National Security Strategy? What role does the Taskforce play here?***

The Prime Minister has committed to publishing a single new National Security Strategy that will bring together all our reviews, including the China Audit and the Strategic Defence Review into one document that will outline how we must meet the threats of our age. This includes ensuring that our instruments of national power, such as updated legislation, are brought together to deliver security for our country. The National Security Strategy will be published in June, ahead of the NATO Summit.

**Relationship between offensive and defensive measures**

*Thank you for agreeing to follow up with further information about the action HMG has taken against adversaries seeking to interfere in our democratic processes and institutions.*

**10. *What punitive actions has the Government taken since December 2023 - for example travel bans, financial sanctions, or targeting adversary IT infrastructure? And what is your assessment about the efficacy of these actions as a deterrent against future wrongdoing?***

We are committed to protecting the cyber security sphere and will take any and all necessary action against foreign threats.

In December 2023, the UK and its allies exposed a series of attempts by the Russian Intelligence Service to target high-profile individuals and entities through cyber operations. We judged that this was done with the intent to use information obtained to interfere in UK politics and democratic processes.

Centre 18, a unit within the Federal Security Service (FSB), has been identified as being accountable for a range of cyber espionage operations targeting the UK.

The activity was in turn conducted by Star Blizzard, a group that the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC, a part of GCHQ) assesses is almost certainly subordinate to Centre 18. The FSB, through Star Blizzard, has been identified as carrying out targeting of universities, journalists, public sector, non-government organisations and other civil society organisations – many of whom play a key role in UK democracy.

Following a National Crime Agency investigation, the UK sanctioned two members of Star Blizzard for their involvement in the preparation of spear-phishing campaigns and associated activity that resulted in unauthorised access and exfiltration of sensitive data, which was intended to undermine UK organisations and more broadly, the UK government.

In addition, in October 2024, the UK sanctioned 3 Russian disinformation agencies and 3 senior figures who were attempting to undermine and destabilise Ukraine and its democracy alongside trying to incite anti-Ukraine protests across Europe and weaken international support for Ukraine.

These actions demonstrate that the UK is committed to taking action against Russian information manipulation and will continue to bear down on anyone conducting such activities.

### **Whole of society approach**

*Your letter of 18 December 2024 stated that tackling risks to democracy requires “a genuinely whole of society approach”*

#### **11. What objectives has the Taskforce set for itself or partners to achieve a “whole of society” approach? Do you envisage any new workstreams over the next two years to deliver on these objectives?**

Taskforce members have been taking forward a wide-ranging programme of work to strengthen public trust in our democratic processes, institutions, and society, to build a whole of society approach and our collective resilience to those who seek to undermine it.

Media literacy is a key tool to build people's resilience to misinformation, disinformation, and AI-generated deepfakes. It is important to empower users with the skills they need to engage critically with online content and make more informed decisions online, including where it relates to elections. Since 2022, DSIT has provided almost £3 million in grant funding for projects designed to build media literacy and critical thinking skills for users of all ages. In 2024, this included £0.5 million to scale up two programmes to provide media literacy support to teachers, children aged 11-16, parents/carers and other professionals working with families.

There is also ongoing work to promote democracy in schools and other education establishments, so that people understand what a fair democracy is, how it operates, and importantly how they can engage and influence it. The ongoing independent Curriculum and Assessment Review is a key piece of work which will seek to deliver a curriculum that ensures children and young people leave compulsory education ready for life and ready for work, building the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to thrive in a fast-changing world. This includes digital, media literacy and life skills.

The Review Group has now published its interim report, which sets out its findings and confirms the key areas for further work. This highlights the successes of the current system, clarifying that the most trusted and valued aspects of our system will remain, whilst setting a positive vision for the future. The Government will respond to the final recommendations in the autumn.

The Government is legislating so that, following the review and the implementation of reforms, academies will be required to teach the reformed national curriculum, alongside maintained schools.

Furthermore, the Government is committed to encouraging engagement in the process amongst all electors, including young people, and we want to build upon recent record levels of individuals registering to vote for elections. As the Taskforce election lead, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government has begun work engaging with stakeholders in the electoral sector, devolved and local government, education, civil society and with young people themselves, to ensure the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds is implemented successfully. Working with them to build the foundations for long-lasting political engagement amongst young people.

In addition, the Government Communications Service is leading work across government communication leads to increase public trust and strengthen societal resilience, including to mis- and disinformation).

### **Political finance**

*Your letter of 18 December 2024 stated that the Government “intends to strengthen the rules around donations to political parties to protect our democracy. MHCLG is developing proposals to give effect to this commitment”.*



**12. Please could you update us on the details of the rule changes and implementation timelines?**

We recognise the continued risk posed by foreign actors who seek to interfere in our democratic processes, including through illegal political donations. The current rules no longer match the sophistication and perseverance of those who wish to undermine our laws, and this threat must be addressed through stronger safeguards. That is why we committed in our manifesto to strengthen the rules around donations.

We are considering a series of new measures that deliver on this commitment, such as enhanced checks by recipients of donations and tighter controls on donors. We will publish a strategy document before the summer recess detailing the Government's approach to electoral reform for this Parliament.

Thank you again for the Committee's work on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Jarvis', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**Dan Jarvis MBE MP**  
Security Minister