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OPERATIONS



SECURITY

# Terrorist threats to Retail, Shopping Centres & Public Spaces

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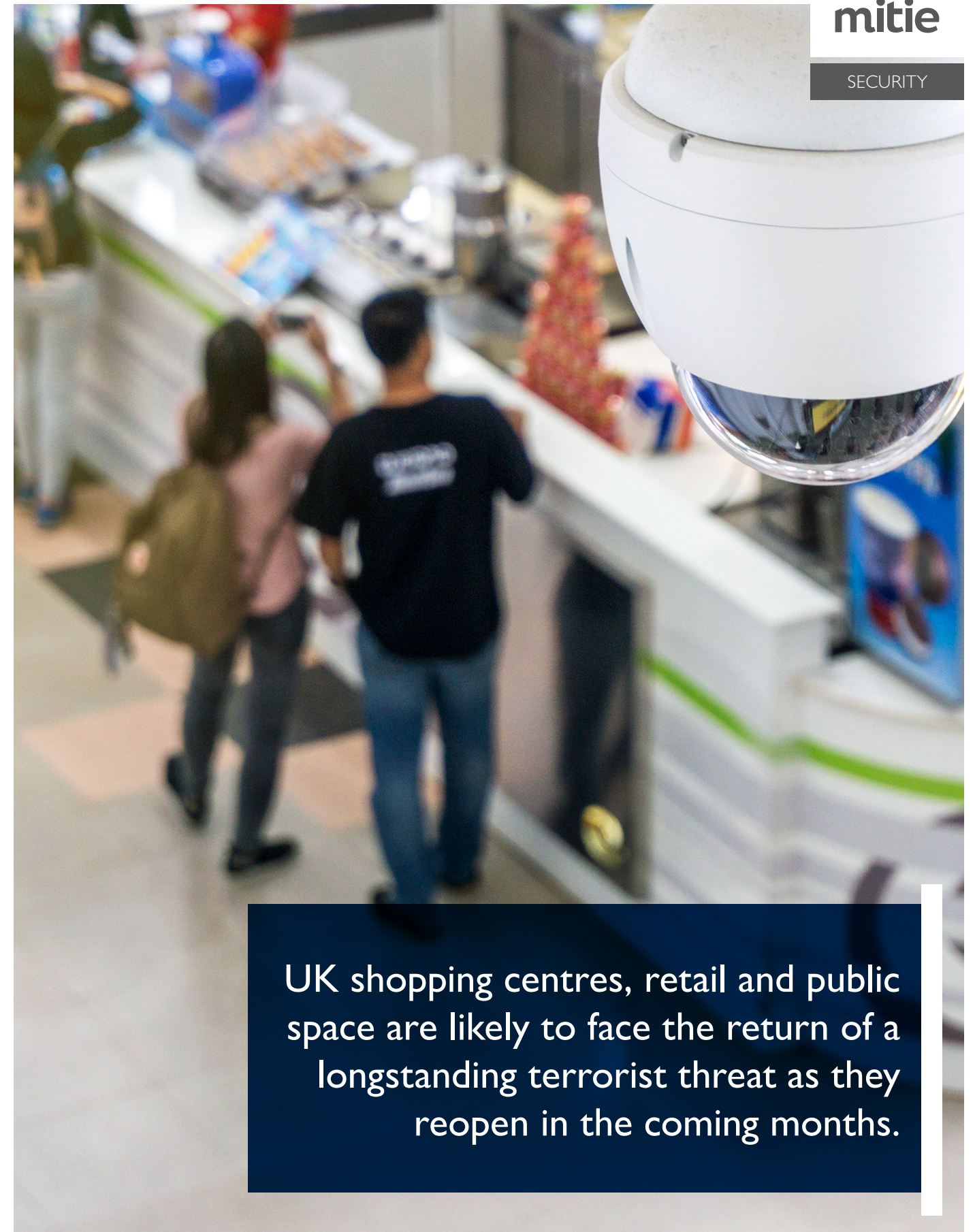


## INTRODUCTION

This report has been compiled ahead of the anticipated reopening of UK shopping centres, retail and public spaces more broadly on April 12. It is intended to provide an overview of the terrorist threat to such locations and a summary of security mitigation techniques recommended by the UK Government to increase their resilience to terrorist activity.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The UK terrorism threat level has recently been lowered from “severe” to “substantial” based on a reduction in the number of attacks across Europe in the preceding months. The threat remains significant.
- UK shopping centres, retail and public spaces are likely to face the return of a longstanding terrorist threat as they reopen in the coming months.
- Terrorist incidents in Europe in the past six months demonstrate that the raising and lifting of lockdown restrictions can impact on the timing of attacks.
- The crowded nature and easy accessibility of these locations are likely to make them attractive targets for aspiring terrorists seeking to carry out mass-casualty attacks.
- High levels of footfall and the number of areas viewable via online platforms make the identification of hostile reconnaissance at such locations increasingly difficult.
- Multiple terrorist groups have encouraged attacks particularly on Western shopping centres in recent years, naming several specific UK centres as potential targets and sharing tactical advice to would-be attackers.
- The majority of identified terrorist plots against UK or European shopping centres, retail and public spaces in recent decades have been Islamist in nature. However other extremist movements could also pose a threat.
- Based on ongoing trends, the most likely form of terrorist attack on a UK shopping centre, retail or public space is likely to be one featuring the use of bladed weapons.
- Two terrorist plots against Westfield shopping centres in the UK have been identified in the past six years.
- The Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) advises that multi-layered security practices focused on the principle of deter, detect and delay is the optimal method for protecting crowded spaces such as shopping centres, retail and public spaces.



**UK shopping centres, retail and public space are likely to face the return of a longstanding terrorist threat as they reopen in the coming months.**



# CURRENT SECURITY CLIMATE

On 8 February 2021, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) reduced the UK's terrorism threat level to substantial. The threat level had been raised to severe the previous November following a series of attacks across Europe in the preceding months, most notably those in Paris, Nice and Vienna.

The decision to reduce the UK threat level was made in light of the significant reduction in the number and overall momentum of attacks in the intervening period. Despite the reduction, the terrorist threat to the UK remains significant, with more than 43,000 people currently featuring on MI5's terrorism watchlist.

During the past 12 months the UK's focus has shifted toward the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, the threat of terrorism has not subsided and many terrorist and/or extremist networks have sought to adapt their messaging to exploit the pandemic for radicalisation and recruitment purposes. There is also evidence that the raising and lifting of lockdown restrictions has the potential to impact on the timing of attacks from terrorists and other hostile actors, with the November small arms attack in

Central Vienna taking place the night before new restrictions were intended to come into effect.

With the apparent success of the UK vaccine rollout and the decreasing number of COVID-19 cases, the UK Government is expected to begin relaxing lockdown restrictions in the coming months. In recent decades, the target selection of terrorist networks throughout the West has increasingly shifted toward a preference for soft, civilian targets, with the primary intention being the infliction of the maximum number of casualties. These trends, viewed alongside the anticipated upcoming reopening of large parts of the commercial sector, indicate that the terrorist threat to UK shopping centres, retail and public spaces is likely to be high in the coming months.



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# SHOPPING CENTRES, RETAIL AND PUBLIC SPACE VULNERABILITIES

Although the design and layout of individual locations varies greatly, they generally contain a number of characteristics and vulnerabilities likely to make them attractive targets to terrorist operatives;



## FREQUENTLY CROWDED

These locations are frequently crowded and attract high levels of footfall, particularly during peak shopping periods. This creates a target-rich environment for hostile actors seeking to perpetrate a mass casualty attack.

## EASILY ACCESSIBLE

These locations are easily accessible to all members of the general public and lack a tightly controlled external perimeter due to commercial necessity. This reduces the number of physical security features which could delay or deter a would-be attacker and makes such locations easily accessible to any hostile actor.

## MULTIPLE CONCEALMENT LOCATIONS

The internal layout of most shopping centres, retailers and public spaces and the high number of interior design features create multiple potential concealment locations for an improvised explosive device (IED).

## OPEN PLAN

The open-plan nature of most UK locations creates long lines of sight and broad fields of fire. Many multiple-level areas also feature locations which could act as an elevated firing platform. These factors could theoretically contribute to a higher casualty count in the event of a small arms attack.

## ONLINE HOSTILE RECONNAISSANCE

The increasing number of areas that can be explored online via platforms such as Google Streetview further reduces the risks of conducting hostile reconnaissance against such locations.

## ENCLOSED AREAS

Enclosed areas allow terrorist operatives greater ability to control the movement of large number of people and reduce the number of potential exit routes for people fleeing an attack. Enclosed areas also provide an external barrier which may assist any attempt by an attacker to defend the location against responding security forces.

## ECONOMICAL & COMMERCIAL IMPACT

The potential secondary economic or commercial impact of an attack on a major location may act as an additional incentive for attackers seeking to maximise the overall level of impact of their attack.

## HIGH LEVELS OF FOOTFALL

The high levels of footfall and accessibility to the general public reduce the likelihood of detection for any hostile actor conducting hostile reconnaissance. An attacker with greater knowledge and familiarity with their surroundings is likely to enjoy multiple operational advantages during the execution of any attack.



# EXTREMIST MEDIA FOCUS PARTICULARLY ON SHOPPING CENTRES

In recent years, multiple terrorist groups have used their media platforms to call for attacks specifically targeting shopping centres, among a broad range of other targets. Such platforms have also been used for the dissemination of tactical advice regarding the most effective means of targeting such locations.

Such content occasionally appears to have been produced with input of experienced terrorist operatives, regularly seeking to learn from prior successes or failures to maximise the lethality of future attacks. Two notable examples of such are included below.

**On 4 May 2017, Islamic State (IS) released a six-page English-language article entitled “Just Terror Tactics” in their flagship online magazine “Rumiyah” (Rome).**

The article states that busy enclosed areas are ideal targets for small arms attacks, specifically citing shopping centres among a list of other suggested targets. It calls for attacks when the location is at its busiest and suggests the attackers exploit days when police or security forces are preoccupied with other local or national events. It suggests the possibility of taking hostages as a means of prolonging the attack and maximising the psychological impact of the operation. It also encourages attackers to choose a location

with minimal numbers of exit points to limit the ability of victims to flee the scene.

**On 21 February 2015, the Somalia-based Islamist terrorist group Al-Shabaab released a 77-minute video via its media arm “Al-Kataib”.**

The video called for attacks on four shopping centres and one shopping district located in the UK, USA and Canada.

**The listed locations included Oxford Street and the Westfield Shopping malls located in Stratford, east London and White City, West London.**

The video made multiple references to its September 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in which 67 people were killed by four gunmen. Western intelligence agencies investigating the video did not identify any specific, credible plots against any of the listed locations.



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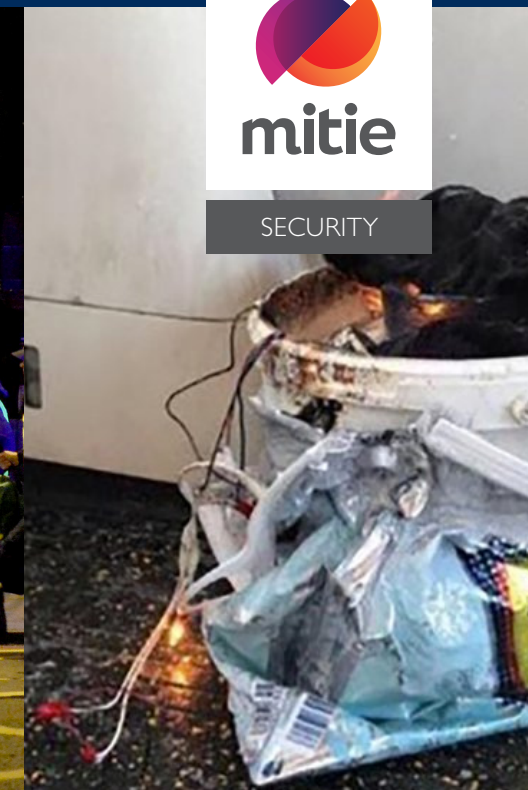
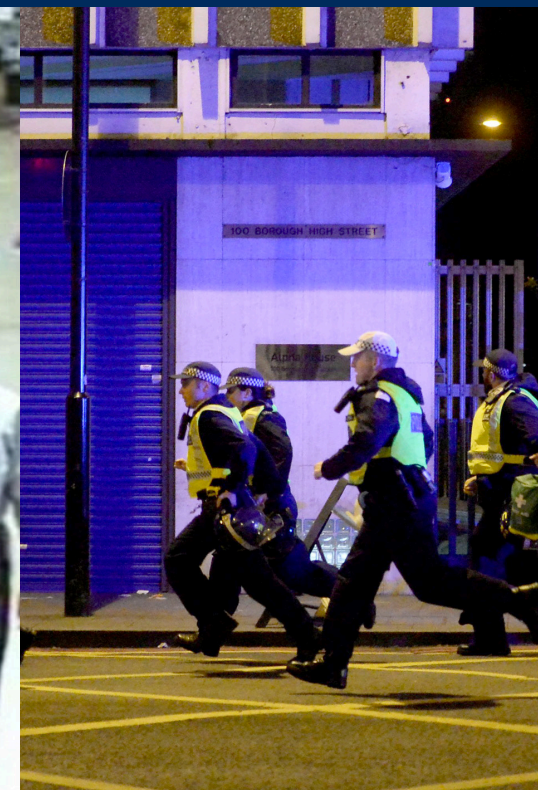


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# TERRORISM TACTICAL TRENDS

Shopping Centres, retailers and public spaces remain subject to many of the broad overarching terrorist tactical and targeting trends affecting the UK as a whole.



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## THE UK IS CURRENTLY SUBJECT TO A BROAD RANGE OF TERRORIST THREATS

Most notably, those emanating from Islamist terrorist, far-right extremists and dissident Irish Republicans.

In recent years there has been a significant rise in the threat posed by far-right extremists, a trend which has occurred in parallel with renewed concerns over the threat posed by dissident Irish Republicans in relation to the Brexit withdrawal deal and concerns of a "hard border" in Northern Ireland.

Despite these rising concerns, the greatest risks to shopping centres, retail and public spaces on the UK mainland are assessed to be posed by Islamist terrorist groups based on current targeting trends. This is due to the fact that the majority of dissident Irish Republican activity remains confined to Northern Ireland and the primary focus of most far-right terrorist plots are either political opponents, religious, ethnic or sexual minorities, rather than the general public as a whole. In addition, the majority of identified plots against Western shopping centres in the past decade have been Islamist in nature. Nevertheless, in an increasingly complex political landscape the threat to shopping centres posed by a broad range of hostile actors should not be discounted.

## THE OVERALL TERRORIST THREAT LEVEL TO THE UK AND EUROPE AS A WHOLE HAS DECLINED

The overall terrorist threat level to the UK and Europe as a whole has declined after reaching a peak during the course of 2016 and 2017.

This trajectory broadly aligns with the rise and fall of the IS "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, and the group's ability to inspire and/or orchestrate attacks in the UK and elsewhere. Despite the collapse of their proto state, IS continues to pose a significant threat to the UK in the form of a decentralised network and as a source of radicalisation. Nevertheless, the impact of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns appears to have further reduced levels of terrorist activity in the UK and elsewhere. Lockdown and travel restrictions are likely to have hampered multiple phases of the terrorist attack cycle, including the procurement of weapons and the carrying out of hostile reconnaissance, as well as reducing the number of viable targets.

Travel restrictions are likely to have impeded any plots featuring an international element and/or operatives participants entering the UK from overseas.

## A TERRORIST ATTACK IN A UK SHOPPING CENTRE IS ONE MOST LIKELY TO FEATURE USE OF A BLADED WEAPON

Based on ongoing tactical trends, the type of terrorist attack in a UK shopping centre assessed to be most likely is one featuring the use of a bladed weapon.

Such attacks have accounted for the majority of attacks across the European continent in recent years, predominantly by lone operatives. Attacks featuring the use of bladed weapons have resulted in a lower-than-average number of casualties than other attack types. Although there has been a rise in vehicle-ramming attacks in the UK and elsewhere, the increased use of hostile vehicle mitigation barriers at UK shopping centres, retail and public spaces is likely to preclude the viability of such an attack.

Terrorist actions in the UK featuring the use of firearms have been rare, most likely due to the greater availability of firearms on the European continent. This is partly due to its closer proximity to Eastern European black markets and the ease with which all types of goods (including illegal firearms) can be transported through the Schengen area. For marauding attacks featuring the use of a bladed weapon or a firearm, the majority of casualties typically take place in the first few minutes of an incident before the security forces have had the opportunity to respond.

## ON THE MAJORITY OF OCCASIONS THE DEVICES DID NOT FUNCTION AS INTENDED

Although there have been a small number of attempted IED attacks in Western Europe in recent years, on the majority of occasions the devices did not function as intended due to deficiencies with their construction or design.

A review of such attacks suggests that, despite the proliferation of IED construction guides online, the technical and operational barriers to effectively deploying such a device remain significant.

Recent years have demonstrated an increasing trend toward IED attacks which are suicide initiated, a trend creating additional challenges for security personnel at shopping centres, retailers and public spaces and elsewhere.



# PREVIOUS PLOTS SPECIFICALLY AGAINST UK SHOPPING CENTRES

There have been several major terrorist plots directed at UK shopping centres in the past fifteen years. Summaries of the most notable of these have been included here.

## 2018



### Westfield Terror Plot

On 9 March 2018, three men were convicted of planning IS-inspired attacks on a broad range of targets including Westfield Shopping Centre in Stratford, east London. The planned attack was the second major UK terrorist plot in a three-year timespan in which a Westfield shopping centre was mentioned as a potential target. The plot had reportedly been inspired by the March 2017 vehicle-ramming attack in Westminster. The Westfield attacks were reportedly intended to feature a blend of firearms, bladed weapons and a car used as a vehicle ramming device.

The terrorist cell was reportedly uncovered when one of the operatives attempted to travel to Turkey from Heathrow in April 2016, drawing the attention of the authorities.

## 2015



### Westfield Bomb Plot

In December 2015, two IS supporters were convicted of plotting to carry out an IED attack against the Westfield Shopping Centre in Shepherd's Bush, London. The attack was intended to coincide with the 10-year anniversary of the 7/7 bombings, which fell on 7 July 2015. The two attackers had reportedly carried out research into militant attacks, purchased and stockpiled over 10kg of an unnamed chemical precursor which can be used to create explosives. On at least two occasions the attackers had tested explosives in their back garden.

The plot was uncovered after one of the attackers issued a post on Twitter under a pseudonym requesting advice on potential target selection and claiming that he was planning a suicide bombing. An investigating officer stated that he believed one of the attackers possessed the ingredients, knowledge and experience to produce a viable device within a couple of days at the time of his arrest.

## 2007



### Bluewater Bomb Plot

In April 2007, five Islamist-extremists were convicted of planning IED attacks against the Bluewater Shopping Centre in Kent and several other targets. The Al-Qaeda-linked cell had connections to the 7/7 attackers and formed part of a wider international network including experienced terrorist operatives. The cell fell among the high number of convicted Islamist terrorists linked to the UK-based Islamist-extremist group Al-Muhajiroun. The cell was found to be in possession of 600kg of ammonium nitrate fertiliser and a large quantity of aluminium powder, both of which are chemical precursors that can be used to create explosives.

The plot was uncovered as part of Operative Crevice, a major counter-terrorism operation by the Metropolitan Police.



# SECURITY MITIGATION

Security guidance issued by the CPNI states that effective physical security of a crowded space is best achieved by multi-layering different measures to achieve a “defence-in-depth” approach. Shopping centres, retail and public spaces and other potential terrorist targets are encouraged to incorporate the principles of “Deter”, “Detect” and “Delay”, supported by an effective response plan, into their security practices.



## DEFENCE-IN-DEPTH APPROACH



### DETER

Deterring a potential attacker from targeting the centre through the demonstration of effective security.



### DETECT

Quickly identifying and escalating suspicious activity or signs of an immediate or potential future threat.



### DELAY

Measures intended to slow down or impede an attacker, providing time for security forces to respond and members of the public to move to safety.



### RESPONSE

Creating appropriate emergency response and business continuity plans to respond to a range of security threats.



## DEFENCE-IN-DEPTH APPROACH



### DETER

Deterring a potential attacker from targeting the centre through the demonstration of effective security.

- Demonstrate a strong security posture through effective and visible activity including the use of CCTV, access control protocols where appropriate, effective security barriers, warning signs, and visible security guards.
- Ensure that security patrols are carried out regularly, but at different times.
- Establish contact with police Counter-Terrorism-Security-Advisers for advice on effective security measures and equipment.
- Liaise and work with local authorities and other relevant business industry bodies to remain up to date on recommended best security practices.
- Use physical barriers and hostile vehicle mitigation features to prevent hostile vehicles from entering your locations.
- If possible, establish vehicle access control points a distance from the location.
- Consider installing glazing protection, such as anti-shatter film or toughened glass, at your premises in order to reduce the number of casualties arising from flying glass in the event of an explosion.



### DETECT

Quickly identifying and escalating suspicious activity or signs of an immediate or potential future threat.

- Ensure that staff are appropriately trained for detecting potential hostile activity and responding to potential terrorist incidents.
- Ensure that all CCTV equipment is appropriately located, installed and monitored to meet key security requirements.
- Ensure that effective procedures are in place for escalating and documenting reports of suspected hostile activity or suspicious incidents. Effective reporting of such incidents is critical for shopping centres, retail and public spaces to understand their operational risks.
- Maintain “good housekeeping” with the use of clear plastic bags for waste disposal and ensuring that open plan areas are free of clutter to increase the speed with which abandoned and/or suspicious items can be detected.
- Recording equipment should have sufficient storage capability to retain good quality images for an extended period in the event that they are needed to retrospectively review a past incident.
- Check references when taking on new members of staff and ensure that you are dealing with reliable companies when hiring third party contractors or employees.
- Acquaint yourself with the current security and terrorist threats facing the UK, or your region and city. Consider which elements of the threat could pose a risk to your location.



### DELAY

Measures intended to slow down or impede an attacker, providing time for security forces to respond and members of the public to move to safety.

- Conduct regular drills to ensure that all staff are familiar with evacuation and invacuation procedures, including exit routes, rendezvous points, and the decision-making process to invoke each of these procedures.
- If preventing an attack is not possible, the application of a dynamic lockdown may be critical in frustrating and delaying the attacker(s). Identify how to quickly and physically secure all access/ egress points to and from the shopping centre. Understand how such measures could be quickly reversed should the need arise, such as in the event of a fire.
- Identify if your site could be subject to zonal controls allowing specific areas to be locked down.
- Specify staff who will lead in the event of an evacuation, directing people to designated areas.
- Identify how to centrally disable any lifts without them returning to the ground-floor in order to delay attackers or shield members of the public from potential dangers.
- Adopt the “Run, Hide, Tell” Government guidance in response to marauding terrorist attacks.



### RESPONSE

Creating appropriate emergency response and business continuity plans to respond to a range of security threats.

- Ensure that you maintain an emergency response plan with a clear structure and mandates that is applicable to any type of security incident, including a terrorist event.
- Emergency response and business continuity plans should be simple, clear flexible, compatible with existing strategies and compliant with all necessary regulations.
- Ensure that building tenants are kept updated on any relevant changes to security practices or emergency response procedures.



## Martyn's Law

There is an ongoing consultation process regarding Martyn's Law, a piece of counter-terrorism legislation which would create additional responsibilities for companies to introduce proportions security measures into publicly accessible spaces over which they are responsible.

The legislation likely to heavily impact upon security planning in shopping centres, retail and public spaces if the proposals are brought into law. The proposed legislation would require companies to engage with freely available counter-terrorism advice and training, conduct vulnerability assessments of their operating places and spaces mitigate the risks created by the vulnerabilities and create and implement a counter-terrorism plan.

## Suspicious Behaviour & Possible Pre-Attack Indicators

Vigilance by staff at all UK shopping centres, retail and public spaces and the creation of a security-conscious culture through regular and consistent communication is essential to ensuring that all such locations are as resilient as possible to terrorists and other potential hostile actors.

Members of staff should be expected to understand their workspace and to alert unusual behaviour or items that are out of place. Staff members should be subject to continual training and review, and should be encouraged that any concerns raised in good-faith will be taken seriously.

Guidance provided by the UK Government provides a number of listed suspicious behaviours and/or potential pre-attack indicators relevant to UK shopping centres, retailers and public spaces centres including:

- People loitering in restricted or non-public areas or paying significant interest in entrances, exits, CCTV cameras, security features or security staff.
- Asking unusual in-depth questions of staff about the layout of the location or its security measures.
- People making notable efforts to conceal their identity.
- Any noted pattern or series of false alarms indicating possible testing of security systems and observations of response behaviour and security procedures.
- Vehicles parked in close vicinity of a location appearing abandoned or being illegally parked.
- Vehicles parked within close vicinity of a location sitting low on the rear axle (potentially indicative of a heavy load in the boot or under the back seat).
- The presence of smoke within a vehicle parked close to a location or emanating from a suspicious package within the centre.
- The presence of an unusual smell or odour emanating from an abandoned bag, package or vehicle parked close to the area.
- Signs that an abandoned bag or package has been intentionally hidden or concealed from public view, or anything to suggest the item is atypical of what could be expected in such a location.
- Visible wires, gas cannisters or modified electrical items such as alarm clocks or mobile phones being visible in a suspicious package, or in a vehicle close to the location.
- The wearing of heavy, bulky jackets inconsistent with the season / temperature by anyone attending the location.





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Mitie Security Operations Centre  
650 Pavilion Drive  
Northampton Business Park  
Northampton  
NN4 7SL

 [mitie-gso.com](https://mitie-gso.com)

 [@MitieSecurity](https://twitter.com/MitieSecurity)

 [alwaysprepared@mitie.com](mailto:alwaysprepared@mitie.com)