



## OPERATIONAL SELECTION POLICY OSP28

### GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS HEADQUARTERS AND ITS PREDECESSORS

**Room 40 - Admiralty (NID25) and MI 1b (pre-1919)**  
**Government Code & Cypher School (1919-1946)**  
**Government Communications Headquarters (1946-)**  
**Joint Technical Language Service (title adopted 1955)**  
**London Communications [-Electronics] Security Agency (1952-1965)**  
**Communications-Electronic Security Department (1965-1969)**  
**Communications-Electronic Security Group (1969-)**

## **1 Authority**

- 1.1 The National Archives' Acquisition Policy statement announced the intention of developing, in consultation with departments, Operational Selection Policies across government. These policies would apply the collection themes described in the policy to the records of individual departments and agencies.
- 1.2 This Operational Selection Policy has been written following work conducted by the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on Public Records with representatives of The National Archives and GCHQ. GCHQ's current selection criteria below incorporate recommendations made by the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council in a draft submission in June 2003.
- 1.3 Operational Selection Policies are intended to be working tools for those involved in the selection of public records. This policy may, therefore, be reviewed and revised in the light of GCHQ's experience of using the policy, or as a result of newly discovered information. GCHQ has agreed a review of five years following formal introduction.
- 1.4 If you have any comments upon this policy, please e-mail [records-management@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:records-management@nationalarchives.gov.uk) or write to:

Acquisition and Disposition Policy Manager  
The National Archives  
Kew, Richmond  
Surrey  
TW9 4DU

## **2 Scope**

- 2.1 This policy forms part of a suite of Operational Selection Policies to be written on the activities of the intelligence and security agencies of the United Kingdom. Operational Selection Policies implement The National Archives' Acquisition and Disposition Policies. They apply the Acquisition and Disposition Policy criteria to the records of certain departments or to categories of records, which can be found in more than one department. They deliver the following benefits to government departments:
  - Enable departments to target review resources on areas of agreed interest
  - Support greater transparency in selection work by making selection criteria available to the public
  - Capture the knowledge of client managers and departmental records staff
  - Allow the timely disposal of records not required for permanent preservation
- 2.2 This policy relates to the records produced by GCHQ and its predecessors in operations in the United Kingdom and overseas. It covers records in all formats, including paper, photographic, microfilm and electronic records.

- 2.3 This Operational Selection Policy provides guidance on the identification of records for permanent preservation. It does not provide guidance on access to records selected thereby.

### **3 Historical Summary: GCHQ and Predecessors**

- 3.1 A convenient summary for the earlier period is "The Evolution of British Sigint 1653-1939" by John Johnson (HMSO 1997) and "How GCHQ Came to Cheltenham" by Peter Freeman (GCHQ Publication 2003), on which the following has drawn, is also relevant.
- 3.2 Records of British Sigint activity prior to 1914 are sparse; and scattered through The National Archives collections. During the First World War both the Admiralty and the War Office operated interception and cryptanalytic bureaux (respectively NID25, popularly known as 'Room 40' (derived from its location in Room 40 Old Admiralty Building) and MO5b, later MI1b. Few records of either organisation have survived, but such as do are to be found in ADM, WO or HW series in The National Archives.
- 3.3 Following the First World War a central governmental organisation was established to carry on jointly the work of these two bureaux. As the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS) it became operational in October 1919. It was at first administered by the Admiralty on behalf of the government, but in 1922 its administration was taken over by the Foreign Office, within which it was subordinated to 'C', the head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). GC&CS was openly declared as responsible for advising on the security of British communications; secretly it was also responsible for exploiting the communications of other countries, a role that in fact predominated. It occupied various offices in London, ultimately arriving in Broadway Buildings (which was also used by SIS).
- 3.4 GC&CS's intelligence work in the inter-War period was directed towards the USSR and the threat of Communist subversion and espionage; other Great Powers and their policies within the international treaty system; threats to British interests, particularly those posed towards the end of the period by Italy and Japan; and direct observation of belligerents, for example in the Abyssinian and Spanish Civil Wars.
- 3.5 In 1938 the then 'C' purchased the Edwardian mansion at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire as a wartime evacuation site for GC&CS, and with the Second World War clearly imminent the intelligence-producing side of the organisation moved there during August 1939. The (smaller) security side, whose main task was the preparation of British codebooks and re-enciphering tables, most of which were printed by the Oxford University Press, moved to Mansfield College, Oxford.
- 3.6 GC&CS expanded rapidly throughout the Second World War, soon outgrowing the accommodation available at Bletchley Park. At first temporary wooden huts, and later permanent brick buildings, were built in the grounds of the main house, and some neighbouring properties were also taken over. Early in 1942 the work was sub-divided, the main effort against military and intelligence communications remaining at Bletchley Park while work against diplomatic and other civil targets returned to London.

- 3.7 Intercept stations supporting GC&CS had been provided by the armed forces prior to the war, and many more were put into operation between 1939 and 1945. Some were large fixed stations (principally in the UK but also in the Middle East and India), but many were mobile, moving with the deployment of British forces. In addition two series of special-purpose stations were constructed. In 1938 the Treasury agreed to the development of civilian-staffed stations to intercept international commercial carriers in time of war when the armed forces' stations would be otherwise employed. The War Office (later SIS) became responsible for the interception of the communications of spies and their controlling authorities, for which further stations were constructed and the Radio Security Service was created.
- 3.8 The main preoccupation of GC&CS throughout the Second World War was the communications of the main belligerents, Germany, Italy and Japan, and of other countries whether belligerent or neutral which could have an influence on the conduct of the War.
- 3.9 By January 1945 there were over 10,000 people working in GC&CS, and perhaps that many again at intercept stations. Following the surrender of Italy in September 1943 GC&CS had moved some resources to Japanese communications, a process accelerated at the end of the war in Europe (VE Day 8 May 1945); but the use of the atomic bomb and the surrender of Japan (VJ Day, 16 August<sup>1</sup> 1945) made this unnecessary. Demobilisation produced a very rapid rundown in staff. Without the exigencies of wartime the accommodation at and around Bletchley Park was unsuitable for a peacetime organisation; but in immediate post-War circumstances a return to central London offices was not possible.
- 3.10 On 1 April 1946 the organisation moved from Bletchley Park to buildings at Eastcote, Middlesex, and officially changed its name to Government Communications Headquarters (this name had been used occasionally though not universally during the War). The security sections returned from Oxford later that year, and the wartime sections in London also came to Eastcote. The Eastcote buildings had housed one of the outstations at which special purpose machines (*bombes*) were operated by GC&CS. They had been hurriedly constructed during the War, and the site was not ideal. The possibility of a return to central London receded, and in 1947 it was decided to move permanently to two sites near Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.
- 3.11 This move was largely carried out 1952-1954. Following the move the Ministry of Defence transferred some responsibilities for advising on technical translations to GCHQ, and during 1955 the Joint Technical Language Service (JTLS) was instituted within the organisation. Meanwhile, the security side of GCHQ was established as a separate organisation, which came into being as the London Communications Security Agency (LCSA) in March 1954 and continued to occupy part of the Eastcote site. (The word '-Electronics' was added to its title in 1958.

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<sup>1</sup> for the purposes of this document

3.12 In April 1965 some units of the Ministry of Defence and the General Post Office transferred to LCSA, which was re-organised and re-named the Communications-Electronic Security Department (CESD). In October 1969 CESD was re-integrated with GCHQ as Communications-Electronic Security Group (CESG) and following some enlargement of the buildings at Cheltenham it moved there during 1977.

#### **4 Current GCHQ Functions**

4.1 GCHQ's intelligence function was publicly avowed in 1983. GCHQ was put on a statutory basis by the Intelligence Services Act (1994), by which its functions are defined as:

- Obtaining and providing signals intelligence
- Providing advice and assistance on languages and technical terminology
- And providing advice and assistance on cryptography and the protection of information

provided that these functions are exercised:

- In the interests of national security with particular reference to the defence and foreign policies of Her Majesty's Government
- Or in the interests of the economic well-being of the UK
- Or in support of the prevention or detection of serious crime

#### **5 Declassification and Release**

5.1 All government departments must release papers of significant historical interest to The National Archives by the time the papers are thirty years old (this is called the 'thirty year rule'). The Lord Chancellor has exempted the intelligence agencies from release and issued a certificate under section 3.4 of the Public Records Act 1958 to that effect. Nevertheless, GCHQ working with The National Archives keeps the holdings under review with regard to eventual release to The Archives.

5.2 GCHQ has completed the process of releasing all its Second World War and earlier material (with the exception of a few pieces withheld on grounds of continuing sensitivity) in over seventy classes in the HW lettercode at The National Archives. The cut-off date for release is VJ-Day (16 August 1945). This means that virtually all extant Sigint material, internal or external, formal or informal, regardless of subject or target, up to VJ Day 1945 has been released. Certain 'stories' were allowed to continue marginally beyond this date in the interests of completeness. In addition, post-War material relating to VENONA (HW 15) has been released complementing that released by the United States. Additionally, a small release of post-War security material has been made (HW 9).

#### **6 Key Selection Themes**

6.1 The Advisory Council following detailed discussion with GCHQ has proposed the following criteria, which GCHQ is happy to accept. Material selected using the following criteria will document GCHQ's involvement in the events and activities described in section 4 above. The following records (not in priority order) produced by GCHQ in the post-war period should be preserved permanently:

## 1. End Product Intelligence Reports

2. Directorate registered files dealing with the following areas of GCHQ work, where the files contain original GCHQ policy development in the form of correspondence, minuting, reports, etc:

2.i Relations with GCHQ's main customers, including ministers, the other intelligence agencies, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the armed forces and the principal departments of state

2.ii Relations with the regulatory, judicial and supervisory bodies (including but not limited to the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Tribunals and Commissioners established under various Acts with powers to investigate the work of or complaints made against GCHQ, the National Audit Office and The National Archives) that exercise oversight over aspects of GCHQ activities

2.iii Relations with intelligence agencies and related bodies of allied nations

2.iv Major technical developments in GCHQ's field of operations detailing advances in GCHQ's methods or challenges posed by targets (this would cover both interception and decryption work and communications security work), including the location, range and effectiveness of intercept stations

2.v Material relating to the allocation of GCHQ effort and resources to targets, and changes to GCHQ priorities (both intercept and communications security)

2.vi Records accounting for GCHQ's expenditure at an organisation wide level (i.e. principal accounting papers, not accounts for particular projects which need not be preserved beyond the requirements outlined in The National Archives' Retention Schedule no 3, *Accounting Records*)

2.vii Major themes in the administration of GCHQ, including policy on staffing levels at home and overseas, security and staff relations, and major changes in GCHQ policy, organisation or procedures

2.viii Major GCHQ investigations and operations and records on important intercept targets, key historical events and *causes célèbres* in a security context

2.ix Records which are in some way 'period pieces', e.g. they illustrate clearly GCHQ attitudes/techniques of the time

2.x Milestones in GCHQ history

3. Registered files of GCHQ divisions, which do not duplicate material that is already held in the Directorate files, and which also satisfy one or more of the common criterion listed at 2 above

4. Unregistered files (i.e. unincorporated branch files or working papers) which do not duplicate material in Directorate or divisional registered files and which also satisfy one or more of the criterion listed at 2 above

5. GCHQ internal histories

6. All registers and other means of reference to registered files and files on targets to allow future analysis and research into records not deemed worthy of permanent preservation

7. Photographic and/or video or film collections which demonstrate themes indicated in the criterion at 2 above or otherwise show the ways in which GCHQ operations are or have been carried out, and which do not duplicate material held in registered or other files or themes that do not intrinsically benefit from a visual record being preserved

## **7 Organisation of the Records**

7.1 GCHQ filing systems have gone through various developments. In 1952 GCHQ introduced procedures following the recommendations of a Treasury Organisation & Methods study on its Registry Services, but the systems have developed over the years with the organisation. Revised structures are being introduced for electronically created records.

## **8 Implementation of Selection Policy**

8.1 GCHQ is committed to compliance with the Public Records Act 1958 in selecting records of historical interest for permanent preservation and eventual transfer to The National Archives. The selection criteria will be applied without regard to whether the records may appear to reflect well or badly on GCHQ.

8.2 For paper records, this policy will be applied to records being appraised at second review at age 25 years. First review will continue to be performed by appropriate desk officers. For electronic records, the appraisal criteria will, where appropriate, be built into electronic document and records management systems as they are implemented.