

# Terror threat level graded 'severe'

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The government today made public its official assessment of the threat of a terrorist attack, warning that it is "severe" - meaning an attack is highly likely.

The five-level categorisation is published for the first time on the [MI5 website](#), and is one degree short of the most severe rating - "critical", which means an attack is "imminent".

The rationalisation of the previous seven categories - previously only made available internally to the security services - has also seen the lowest possible threat level upgraded from "negligible" to "low".

The level is published on both the MI5 site and the [Home Office site](#), but the government also created a stand-alone website - [Intelligence.gov.uk](#) - aimed at explaining the role of the security services.

The new intelligence website includes brief histories of the security and intelligence agencies MI5, MI6 and the government listening post GCHQ, plus the Defence Intelligence Staff and Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre.

It also explains the role of ministers, how the agencies are accountable, how intelligence records are released by the National Archive and links to relevant legislation.

Under the previous system, the national threat level had been set at "severe general" since August 2005.

The five levels are: low, moderate, substantial, severe and critical.

"Severe" means an attack is "highly likely". The new version merges previous categories of "severe general" and "severe defined" into a single "severe" grade.

The Conservatives welcomed the initiative, but the shadow home secretary, David Davis, complained that his party had been "calling for this for some time".

When John Reid, the home secretary, unveiled the new system in the Commons last month, he warned that the system was "not an exact science" and appealed for continued public vigilance at all times.

Indeed, the government had reduced the terror alert warning prior to the July 7 2005 bombings.

The UK's system now echoes the five-level system of the USA, although that is colour-coded from green to red, the highest state of alert.

Some commentators have queried what the public is supposed to do with such information. But one former police officer who served on Cobra - the Downing Street emergency resilience committee - insisted it helped the public feel more assertive in challenging stray packages or contacting the police.

Retired CID officer David Hill said: "It helps the public to be more vigilant and not to worry they are wasting police time if they inform them of unclaimed rucksacks on the tube, for instance.

"I don't think knowing the threat level will panic the public. The response after the July 7 bombing was intelligent and calm.

"These measures are long overdue. Previously even serving police officers frequently did not know what the threat level was."