

Blog: Scottish Biometrics Commissioner would support future use of live facial recognition by Police Scotland to protect women, girls, and children.

In this short blog, I set out the reasons why I would support the future use of live facial recognition by Police Scotland primarily to protect women, girls, and children from male violence and additionally for other proportionate law enforcement purposes.

On 31 January 2025, The Times newspaper carried a wide-ranging interview with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in which he backed digital IDs and encouraged more use of Live Facial Recognition (LFR) by the police in the UK to identify criminals including sex offenders.

In the article, the former Prime Minister explained that in 2024, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) had arrested 578 suspects during LFR deployments, including fifty-five rapists and sexual offenders.¹ These numbers should be interpreted against the context of about two deployments per week, a population base of 8.95 million residents and recorded crime in the MPS area of 938,020 crimes in 2023/24. This means that the number of arrests from LFR deployments by the MPS was equivalent to around 0.06% of recorded crime. In the same period, the MPS made 96,423 arrests, meaning that the number of arrests from LFR deployments was equivalent to 0.59% of all MPS arrests.

In highlighting the number of sex offenders arrested as a percentage of all arrests (9.5%) during LFR deployments, my attention was drawn to the protective value of LFR as a strategic policing response to the scourge of male violence in the UK against women, girls, and children.² In doing so, the article also highlighted the perennial conundrum facing policing in a modern democracy in terms of how best to protect human rights whilst also preventing and responding to human wrongs. Fortunately, these competing obligations are not binary choices albeit too often they may seem so in the public discourse of those preoccupied with notions of the ‘surveillance state’ and ‘dangerously authoritarian police surveillance.’³

Fortunately, Article 8 (2) of the Human Rights Act (HRA) directly addresses this ‘double-bind’ faced by policing and provides that there shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of an individual’s right to privacy ‘except in accordance with the law’ including ‘where necessary for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others’. Other articles of the HRA such as Article 2 (Right to life) are also not absolute

¹ Tony Blair: Bring in digital IDs to get tough on populism, The Times, 31 January 2025.

² 80% of biometric data held by UK policing relates to adult male offenders.

³ For example, Big Brother Watch, Stop Facial Recognition.

rights and can be lawfully interfered with, for example the police using proportionate and necessary force to neutralise the threat posed by an armed terrorist.

Section 20 of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2021 places a duty on all constables of Police Scotland to prevent and detect crime, to maintain order and to protect life and property. In particular, the duty to protect life means that the distinct role of policing in Scotland is broader than corresponding legislation in England and Wales which focusses on police powers to investigate crime, prevent crime, and dispose of criminal cases. Thus, the affirmative duty to protect life in Scotland extends to all citizens in Scotland including potential future victims of crime and not just those already harmed, injured, or killed because of criminal actions. In this regard, around 80% of persons who offend in Scotland are male with 81% of domestic abuse incidents having a female victim and a male offender. Scotland also has more than seven thousand registered sex offenders (RSOs) with around 68% of RSOs managed in the community through mechanisms such as Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs) to protect the public, including children from harm. An SHPO can for example, include prohibitions on an offender's behaviour such as unsupervised contact with children.

In this regard, the value of LFR in safeguarding children was brought into sharp relief by a [case study](#) published by the MPS on 21 May 2025. In the case in question, LFR cameras alerted officers to a Registered Sex Offender who when engaged by officers was found to be with a 6-year-old girl. The girl's mother was unaware that the male was a Registered Sex Offender.

Further checks confirmed he was in breach of his SHPO, which prohibited him from being alone with a child under the age of fourteen. He was also in possession of a lock knife concealed in the buckle of his belt. He was subsequently sentenced to two years in jail, having a previous conviction for fifteen counts of indecent assault on a female child and five counts of gross indecency with a child for which he previously served a nine-year prison term. This case illuminates the safeguarding value of LFR and reminds us that technology can prompt officer intervention that might not otherwise have happened. I dread to think what could have transpired with the 6-year-old girl and/or other children had this dangerous individual not been identified by officers acting on a prompt from LFR.

In 2024, the Chair of the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) launched a national conversation in Scotland in partnership with Police Scotland and my own office. A report on the national conversation will go to the SPA Policing Performance Committee tomorrow.

At the time of writing, Scotland has not yet proceeded to a decision on having a national consultation on whether Police Scotland might adopt LFR in future and ultimately any such decision will rightly be one for the Chief Constable in terms of her

operational independence for the delivery of policing for which she is in turn held to account by the Authority.

Readers of this blog may be familiar with contemporary debates around the police use of LFR which rightly focus on the potential erosion of democratic rights and civil liberties and undermining personal freedoms but without considering in equal measure the obligations on Police Scotland to keep citizens safe whilst simultaneously neglecting the perspectives of victims past, present and future.

Against that context, I welcome the recent announcement by the UK Information Commissioner that his office will audit police forces using facial recognition technology, and publish his findings, securing assurance that deployments are well governed and people's rights protected. I also welcome the ICO providing advice to government on proposed changes to the law, ensuring that future use remains proportionate and publicly trusted.

Any future decision by Police Scotland to adopt LFR would necessitate a significant programme of work including to address issues of custody image quality and to develop policy, processes, and governance arrangements and to procure an ICT solution with transparent algorithms addressing accuracy rates and bias. Any future deployment would of course also have to be proportionate and lawful and adhere to UK data protection law and in Scotland with the Code of Practice approved by the Scottish Parliament.

However, in principle, I would support the future use of live facial recognition in Scotland by Police Scotland as an effective means to protect women, girls, and children from male violence and additionally for other proportionate law enforcement purposes.

If Scotland were to face a future terrorist incident of a similar nature to the Manchester Arena bombing or perhaps a child abduction and/or murder in circumstances where LFR could otherwise be a valuable tactical response to rich intelligence on known persons of interest, then not having it available as a tactical option should only be because of a decision taken by the Chief Constable and not by anyone who is not operationally responsible and democratically accountable for the policing of Scotland.