

Press release: Biometrics

Commissioner's response to the Home Office Biometrics Strategy

The long awaited Home Office Biometrics Strategy published today is to be welcomed as the basis for a more informed public debate on the future use of biometrics by the Home Office and its partners.

The strategy lays out the current uses of biometric data and the development of new multi-user data platforms. Unfortunately the strategy says little about what future plans the Home Office has for the use of biometrics and the sharing of biometric data. A debate is needed given the rapid improvements in biometric matching technologies and the increasing ability to hold and analyse large biometric databases.

While the use of biometric data may well be in the public interest for law enforcement purposes and to support other government functions the public benefit must be balanced against loss of privacy. Biometric data is especially sensitive because it is most intrusive of our individual privacy and for that reason who decides the balance is as important as what is decided. Legislation carries the legitimacy that Parliament decides that crucial question.

It is disappointing that the Home Office document is not forward looking as one would expect from a strategy. In particular it does not propose legislation to provide rules for the use and oversight of new biometrics, including facial images. This is in contrast to Scotland where such legislation has been proposed. Given that new biometrics are being rapidly deployed or trialled this failure to set out more definitively what the future landscape will look like in terms of the use and governance of biometrics appears short sighted at best.

What the strategy does propose is an oversight and advisory board to make recommendations about governance just short of legislation. If that results in the development of a set of principles to inform future legislation then it is also welcome. However, the advisory board is mainly described as concerned with the use of facial images by the police.

What is actually required is a governance framework that will cover all future biometrics rather than a series of ad hoc responses to problems as they emerge. I hope that the Home Office will re-consider and clearly extend the advisory board's remit to properly consider all future biometrics and will name the board accordingly.