UK to set statutory safeguards and a watchdog for police facial recognition

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News story

Stronger laws for police using facial recognition technology

New laws to govern the use of groundbreaking technology and maximise public safety.

From:

Home Office

Published: 4 November 2026

Facial recognition technology that helps police catch thousands of dangerous criminals every year will be subject to tough new safeguards to ensure that the technology is used fairly and safely.

An independent watchdog will be created to provide independent oversight of police use of current and future technologies – and could potentially stop forces from using them if they fail to comply.

It will also be made clear that any technologies used by law enforcement must be rigorously and independently tested against bias or discrimination of age, gender or race.

And a specific law will be introduced to make it clear that police use of facial recognition must be intelligence led and proportionate, so it is only used when officers believe wanted people could be present in an area.

These changes follow a public consultation, which highlights that – while there is strong support for its use and its effectiveness in catching offenders – there is a need for stronger safeguards around the extent of its use.

Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, said:

Facial recognition technology has been the biggest breakthrough for catching criminals since DNA matching, already helping police take thousands of dangerous criminals off our streets.

The benefits are clear, but we must ensure that its use is fair, safe and proportionate.

It is right we put in place clear laws to ensure that the use of this technology is watertight, so the public can have confidence that these tools, which are vital to our safety, are used responsibly too.

Facial recognition has a proven track record in taking sex offenders and rapists off the streets and is doing crucial work to support the government’s mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade.

Static live facial recognition cameras piloted in Croydon between October 2025 and March 2026 led to 173 arrests, including suspects wanted for rape, kidnap and sexual assault. The Met reported a 10.5% drop in overall crime in the area against the previous year, and a 21% decrease in offences linked to violence against women and girls.

Facial recognition technology has also been used to support police in managing registered sex offenders in the community. At this year’s Notting Hill Carnival, police used the technology to stop 86 registered sex offenders, leading to the arrest of 7 offenders who were found to be in breach of civil orders or notification requirements.

Al Murray, Director of PoliceAI, said:

Facial recognition technology is one of a number of proven capabilities that can help policing work more effectively to keep the public safe. Used responsibly, technologies like this can help officers identify wanted offenders more quickly, make better use of available information and focus more time on protecting victims and communities.

The benefits of technology adoption are greatest when innovation is matched by strong safeguards, transparency and public accountability. We welcome the government's commitment to providing a clearer framework for the use of facial recognition, helping forces adopt technology consistently, responsibly and with the confidence of the public they serve.

While there are already legal requirements in place for facial recognition, they are set out across a vast patchwork system and in need of a clear, consistent set of laws.

The new watchdog will advise on standards, provide scrutiny and make recommendations to ministers on emerging technologies and risks. In extreme cases where forces fail to comply with regulations, it can pursue enforcement action which could see them handed a court injunction preventing them from using these technologies.

In consultation with this new regulator, the government will develop a new legal code of practice for police to set clear standards and rules that all forces must abide by.

In addition, a separate legal code for the private sector will be developed to make sure that businesses using facial recognition to tackle crime, including shops, are using it responsibly and complimentary to law enforcement efforts.

Today's measures follow an £11 million investment to triple the number of live facial recognition vans available to police forces in England and Wales. This is part of the government's biggest reforms to policing in 200 years to help keep communities safe.

Neil Basu QPM, former head of Counter Terrorism Policing, said:

Live facial recognition is a massive step forward for law enforcement – a digital 21st century step change in the tradition of fingerprints and DNA.

Like all new technologies, live facial recognition had a difficult start and the consultation was absolutely necessary to ensure this new technology was acceptable to the wider public.

With a real police officer making the final decision a human one, and with the proper legal safeguards and independent oversight in place, I have no doubt LFR will catch many more criminals and make us all much safer.

Dal Babu, former Chief Superintendent at the Metropolitan Police, said:

Safe use of facial recognition is a valuable tool for effective policing. I am therefore pleased to see significant and meaningful engagement with the public to ensure public confidence its use to protect communities and arrest criminals. I therefore strongly welcome these commitments from the government.

The Home Office has independently tested a new algorithm for retrospective facial recognition proven to be highly accurate and without bias which will be available for police forces to roll out from next year. The algorithm used for the live facial recognition vans funded by the government has already been independently tested.

Sue Daley, Director of Tech and Innovation at techUK, said:

Facial recognition is a powerful technology that offers real opportunities for law enforcement, but it's right that the public's concerns are properly addressed.

As set out in our consultation response earlier this year, our members support clear, consistent regulation for this technology. This will be crucial to establish and maintain public support in the long-term. We look forward to continuing our work with the Home Office to make that happen.

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