

## UK Biometrics Strategy: Time for a reset?



By Dr Brian Plastow  
Scottish Biometrics Commissioner  
[www.biometricscommissioner.scot](http://www.biometricscommissioner.scot)

### UK Biometrics Strategy

Six years ago the UK Home Office published its [Biometrics Strategy](#) 'Better public services Maintaining Public Trust'. The strategy set out the strategic importance of biometric data and technologies to UK policing, border control and national security.

Included within the strategy is a decision-making framework for Home Office officials to consider before introducing any new biometric technology or a new application of an existing biometric technology.

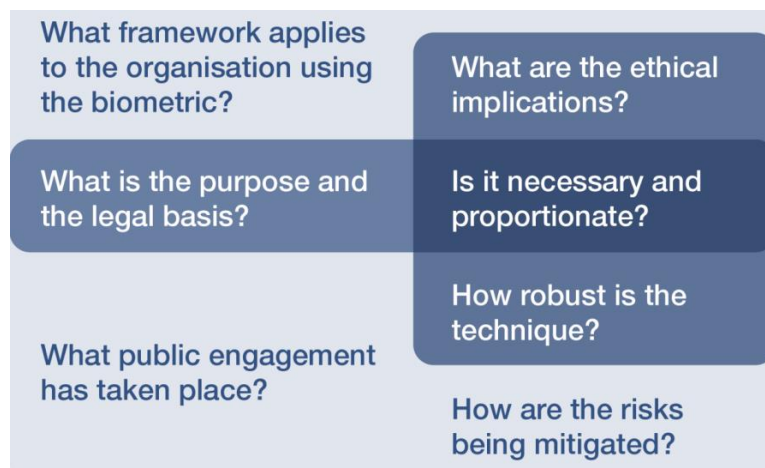


Figure No 1: Home Office Biometrics Strategy Framework

In terms of maintaining public confidence and trust, the strategy emphasises the importance of four pillars of independent oversight as established through the offices of the Biometrics Commissioner, the Surveillance Camera Commissioner, the Forensic Science Regulator and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Yet only three years after its publication the strategy began to unravel as the UK Government simultaneously sought to abolish two of those pillars and largely neglected public engagement on its approach to biometrics.

On 22 May 2024, the Prime Minister then announced that there was to be a snap UK general election resulting in the dissolution of Parliament. Consequentially, several legislative proposals were withdrawn including the highly controversial Data Protection and Digital Information (No 2) Bill which amongst other things had sought to abolish the twin offices of the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner for England and Wales.

This was a proposal that I had strongly opposed since 2021, including because of devolution consequences for Scotland. In a [New Year opinion piece](#) published on my website on 8 January, I discussed a worrying pattern of democratic backsliding in the UK including the disempowerment of independent regulators.

Against the context of the demise of policy intended to erode the checks and balances of independent oversight of the police use of biometrics, it is my view that the UK general election now presents an opportunity for a 'strategic reset' of UK Government Biometric Strategy which incidentally has not been refreshed since 2018.

### **The need for a strategic reset**

In March 2020, the Centre for Emerging Technology and Security (CETaS) at the Alan Turing Institute published a research report [‘The Future of Biometric Technology for Policing and Law Enforcement: Informing UK Regulation’](#). The study suggests that in the next five to ten years, the type of biometrics available to law enforcement are likely to broaden dramatically. The study highlights the development of technologies moving beyond traditional verification and identification towards frictionless and behavioural biometric formats including multimodal systems which combine multiple biometric data sources to enhance law enforcement and security capabilities.

The research reinforces my own view that the UK's legal framework (and strategy) for biometrics is inadequate and in need of reform principally because it is failing to keep pace with rapid changes to biometric technology. The research also highlights evidence of public anxiety over the adequacy of safeguards to protect individuals from a range of risks, such as data misuse and the discriminatory implications of certain 'novel' emerging use cases.

In an era where AI-enabled biometrics present ever increasing security possibilities, I support the call for better legislation and codes of practice. This was the path chosen in Scotland, when the Scottish Parliament approved the [Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020](#), and again in November 2022, when the Parliament approved the Commissioner's statutory [Code of Practice](#), making Scotland the first country in the world to publish a statutory code, backed by legal powers to ensure compliance.



"The Code of Practice for Scotland is leading the way in a progressive approach to public accountability for police use of biometric data."

Angela Constance  
Justice Secretary



Image: Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Commissioner.

### Key Considerations

The new UK Parliament has been called to meet on Tuesday 09 July 2024. The State Opening of Parliament and the King's Speech will follow on Wednesday 17 July 2024. Whatever form that new Parliament takes, I would encourage a strategic reset of UK Biometrics Strategy together with the development of a 'national biometric interoperability framework' to which independent oversight safeguards are applied. Such a framework already exists in other nations such as Australia.

Responsibly enhancing the interoperability of biometric systems and biometric exchange between various agencies of the State will strengthen our national security, improve border security, improve public service, and help to prevent, disrupt, and detect criminal activity. As the availability of AI-enabled biometric technologies and software increases, there will inevitably be a corresponding decrease in cost meaning that their use will rightly continue to expand.

By following ['The Three Laws of Biometrics'](#) produced by the global biometrics institute, future strategy and the advocated national biometric interoperability framework would be in safe hands. Biometric data and technologies are of critical importance to our safety and security, and as David Wong said in a 2015 podcast:

***'New technology is not good or evil in and of itself. It's all about how people choose to use it.'***

