

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.

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News story: Over 10,000 troops from nine nations ready to meet global challenges

The agreement marks the end of the establishment of the JEF framework and is a key milestone in preparing the force for action. With the UK at the forefront as the framework nation, the JEF can now deploy over 10,000 personnel from across the nine nations.

Speaking at the event at Lancaster House today Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Our commitment today sends a clear message to our allies and adversaries alike – our nations will stand together to meet new and conventional challenges and keep our countries and our citizens safe and secure in an uncertain world.

We are judged by the company we keep, and while the Kremlin seeks to drive a wedge between allies old and new alike, we stand with the international community united in support of international rules.

Launched in 2015, the joint force has continued to develop so that it's able to respond rapidly, anywhere in the world, to meet global challenges and threats ranging from humanitarian assistance to conducting high intensity combat operations.

The JEF, made up of nine northern European allies Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, is more than a simple grouping of military capabilities. It represents the unbreakable partnership between UK and our like-minded northern European allies, born from shared operational experiences and an understanding of the threats and challenges we face today.

In May this year, the JEF demonstrated its readiness with a live capability demonstration on Salisbury Plain. It featured troops from the nine JEF nations, including troops from the UK Parachute Regiment, the Danish Jutland Dragoon Regiment, the Lithuanian "Iron Wolf" Brigade and the Latvian Mechanised Infantry Brigade, which conducted urban combat operations with air support provided by Apaches, Chinooks, Wildcats and Tornados.

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News story: Health advice for residents affected by Saddleworth Moor fire

With the fire at Saddleworth Moor still alight, Public Health England (PHE) has issued health advice to people affected by the smoke.

Residents in areas affected by smoke should stay indoors, keep their doors and windows closed and tune in to their local radio station for advice and information.

Motorists who have to travel through the smoke should keep windows closed and switch air conditioning systems to recycle or recirculate air. If people need to be outdoors, they should try to avoid areas affected by any smoke or ash, or to limit the time that they spend in them.

Smoke can irritate air passages, the skin and the eyes, leading to coughing and wheezing, breathlessness and chest pain. It can also worsen existing problems such as asthma so people should carry their inhaler with them at all times.

Anyone concerned about their symptoms should contact their GP or NHS 111.

In addition, PHE appreciates the hot weather is having a combined effect and also recommends:

- wearing lighter clothing
- keeping hydrated with cool drinks
- limiting activities that might contribute to emissions within the home, such as cooking
- setting any air conditioning to recirculate mode
- limiting the time you spend outdoors and avoiding strenuous physical activity
- once the smoke has moved away, consider opening doors and windows to allow the house to cool down.

Image courtesy of the University of Dundee.