



# Home Office

**Rt Hon Chris Philp MP**  
**Minister of State for Crime, Policing**  
**and Fire**

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[www.gov.uk/home-office](http://www.gov.uk/home-office)

Jess Phillips MP  
House of Commons

1 February 2024

Dear Jess,

## **Criminal Justice Bill: police use of facial recognition**

During the consideration of the Criminal Justice Bill in Committee on 16 January you asked whether the police could use retrospective facial recognition to identify potential witnesses. I said I would write to you and am also taking the opportunity to clarify some further related points that arose during the debate on clause 21 (Official Report, columns 223-236).

For general information on police use of facial recognition you might want to look at the Home Office factsheet - [Police use of Facial Recognition: Factsheet - Home Office in the media \(blog.gov.uk\)](#).

During the debate I said that there was an example where facial recognition was used to identify someone who had committed a sexual offence on a bus, and you asked if the technology could be used to identify potential witnesses. In the example the offender, Craig Walters, was jailed for life in 2021 after attacking a woman he followed off a bus. He was arrested within 48 hours of the incident thanks to South Wales Police using facial recognition on images captured by CCTV, including on the bus. In that case the victim reported the crime, so the question of using facial recognition to identify other potential witnesses did not arise.

In using facial recognition, the police act under their common law powers to prevent and detect crime. In some circumstances the police might need to find or identify those who they would have reasonable grounds to suspect would have information of importance and relevance to progress an investigation. This is recognised in the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice on live facial recognition - [Live facial recognition | College of Policing](#). This says that there is a need to proceed with care and the standard for inclusion is 'high'. It also provides an example of the circumstances where facial recognition may be used to help locate those who witnessed a knife attack and are likely to have information to help progress the investigation.

I said that there were 17 alerts, and all were accurate at two live facial recognition deployments in Croydon last December, who were all stopped and arrested. As the

Metropolitan Police's website shows - [LFR Deployment Grid \(met.police.uk\)](https://www.met.police.uk) - there were in fact 30 alerts, including one false alert, and 15 arrests. As you will see there have already been further deployments this year, resulting in 22 more arrests.

The Court of Appeal in *Bridges vs South Wales Police (SWP)* did not set a specific level of accuracy for live facial recognition in terms of false alerts, but the National Physical Laboratory found that the algorithm SWP and the Met use has improved significantly since then, and that it was in the region of 1:6,000 to 1:60,000 false alerts at the settings they use, and depending on the size of the watchlist. In practice the technology has been far more accurate than that, and there were only two false alerts in the whole of last year.

The College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practice on live facial recognition referred to above sets out how it should be used and the safeguards. It also sets out the categories of people who can be included on watchlists and the types of images that can be used, which in practice are mainly custody images.

I am copying this letter to Alex Norris and placing a copy in the Commons Library.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Philp', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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