# London shopper challenges Facewatch watchlist after 39p paracetamol dispute



A recent incident at a Home Bargains store in London has sparked serious concerns over the implementation and oversight of facial recognition technology in retail environments. A 62-year-old woman discovered she had been added to a watchlist operated by Facewatch, a facial recognition system used to identify potential shoplifters, after a dispute regarding 39p worth of paracetamol. This revelation was made when staff at the store confronted her and directed her attention to a Facewatch notice, indicating the presence of the technology.

Facewatch operates by analysing CCTV footage and comparing individuals' faces to a database of known offenders. While numerous retailers, including Asda and Sports Direct, have adopted this technology with the intent of deterring theft, the rise of such systems has ignited vigorous debate. Privacy advocates argue that the surveillance methods infringe upon the rights of consumers and lack adequate legal frameworks to ensure fair treatment. The woman, who prefers to remain anonymous, has since filed a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) arguing that the processing of her biometric data violates the Data Protection Act, which mandates that such actions must serve a “substantial public interest”.

The incident unfolded on 25 April when the woman picked up two packets of paracetamol for her daughter to purchase. Following a misunderstanding, she was accused of theft, her bag was searched, and her personal supply of paracetamol was confiscated. The woman, who regularly carries paracetamol for health reasons, did not think much of the incident at first. However, when she returned to the store on 30 May with her family, she was abruptly asked to leave, a situation exacerbated by her distress over being labelled a thief over a trivial amount.

Her family reports that since this experience, she has lost the confidence to shop alone, plagued by anxiety about being treated with suspicion. “She’s really struggling because even to go into Tesco she gets really stressed thinking ‘or am I allowed? Would they kick me out?’”, her daughter explained. This personal turmoil illustrates a broader concern about the psychological impact of invasive surveillance practices on individuals who are incorrectly flagged as criminals.

According to the additional complaint submitted to the ICO, the Facewatch technology allegedly fails to meet the public interest threshold required for such biometric processing, particularly in light of the minor nature of the alleged offence. Alex Lawrence-Archer, a solicitor representing the woman, emphasises that this incident highlights serious flaws in how individuals are added to biometric watchlists without an opportunity to contest the allegations made against them.

Support for her case has emerged from advocacy organisations, including Big Brother Watch, which argues that there is an alarming lack of due process regarding the surveillance technology employed by retailers. Madeleine Stone, a senior officer at the organisation, asserts that the government must take immediate action to halt what she describes as “Orwellian and discriminatory technology” that jeopardises shoppers’ rights.

In response to the growing scrutiny surrounding biometric surveillance, Facewatch has stated that its technology aims to assist retailers in crime prevention and employee protection while adhering to legal standards. They highlighted that shoplifting incidents in England and Wales have escalated dramatically, with over 516,000 reported last year. Yet, this stance fails to mitigate the privacy concerns raised by consumer advocates, who argue that the existing legal framework is insufficient to protect individual rights.

The ICO has previously mandated changes to Facewatch's operations, focusing on limiting its use to cases involving "repeat offenders" or significant offences. This regulation reflects an ongoing push for clearer guidelines on biometric data processing amid concerns over its widespread and sometimes indiscriminate application.

Echoing these concerns, a recent report from the Ada Lovelace Institute calls for comprehensive regulation of facial recognition technology, warning that the UK's current legal framework operates akin to a "wild west", with insufficient safeguards against potential misuse and misidentification. Critics of the technology assert that without robust regulations, the risks to civil liberties continue to grow, elevating the urgency of addressing these issues at a national level.

Amidst these developments, organisations and legal experts continue to advocate for the establishment of a dedicated regulatory body to oversee the use of biometric technologies, ensuring that they are implemented in a manner that respects and protects individual rights.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/09ce1755-554e-43c9-90ad-8e07196763b0)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london), [[5]](https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/media-centre/news-and-blogs/2022/05/ico-fines-facial-recognition-database-company-clearview-ai-inc), [[6]](https://legalvision.co.uk/data-privacy-it/key-legal-considerations-using-facial-recognition-technology/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-watchdog-orders-serco-stop-using-facial-recognition-monitor-staff-2024-02-23/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/09ce1755-554e-43c9-90ad-8e07196763b0), [[6]](https://legalvision.co.uk/data-privacy-it/key-legal-considerations-using-facial-recognition-technology/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/09ce1755-554e-43c9-90ad-8e07196763b0), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/26/facial-recognition-cameras-in-uk-retail-chain-challenged-by-privacy-group)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jun/06/shopper-facewatch-watchlist-39p-paracetamol-london> - A London woman discovered she was added to a facial recognition watchlist at a Home Bargains store after a dispute over 39p worth of paracetamol. She was informed by staff and directed to a Facewatch sign. Facewatch is a system used by retailers to identify shoplifters by analysing CCTV footage and comparing faces to a private database of known offenders. Stores like Asda, Budgens, Sports Direct, and Costcutter have employed this technology, despite privacy concerns about its impact on shoppers' rights. The woman has filed a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, arguing that processing biometric data requires substantial public interest to be lawful. Her family reports she has become anxious about shopping alone since the incident.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/09ce1755-554e-43c9-90ad-8e07196763b0> - AI experts are urging the UK government to strengthen regulations on facial recognition technology. A report by the Ada Lovelace Institute highlights significant gaps in the current governance of biometrics and calls for comprehensive legislation and a dedicated regulator. The report warns that the existing legal framework is insufficient to address the growing use of facial recognition by police and private companies. In 2024, UK police scanned nearly 5 million faces, leading to over 600 arrests, and the technology is increasingly used in retail and sports venues. Critics argue that the lack of clear legal boundaries makes the UK a 'wild west' and jeopardises human rights, particularly with the emergence of AI systems capable of analysing emotions and intentions. While the government acknowledges the need for potential new laws, current oversight falls behind other regions like the EU and some U.S. states that have introduced strict limits. Privacy advocates stress the urgent need for safeguards to prevent misidentification and protect civil liberties. The Home Office defends facial recognition as a valuable policing tool but acknowledges the need for modern, targeted legislation to ensure lawful and ethical use.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-watchdog-orders-serco-stop-using-facial-recognition-monitor-staff-2024-02-23/> - The UK's Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has ordered outsourcing company Serco Group to cease using facial recognition and fingerprint scanning technology to monitor employee attendance in its leisure business. An ICO investigation found that Serco Leisure, Serco Jersey, and associated community leisure trusts had unlawfully processed the biometric data of over 2,000 employees across 38 facilities. Employees were required to use biometric data to clock in and out without being provided alternative methods, making it a condition for receiving payment. Serco, which offers various government services, including defence and transport, introduced this technology nearly five years ago and has committed to comply with the enforcement notice.
5. <https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/media-centre/news-and-blogs/2022/05/ico-fines-facial-recognition-database-company-clearview-ai-inc> - The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) fined Clearview AI Inc £7,552,800 for using images of people in the UK, and elsewhere, collected from the web and social media to create a global online database for facial recognition. The ICO also issued an enforcement notice, ordering the company to stop obtaining and using the personal data of UK residents that is publicly available on the internet and to delete the data of UK residents from its systems. The ICO found that Clearview AI Inc breached UK data protection laws by failing to use the information of people in the UK in a way that is fair and transparent, failing to have a lawful reason for collecting people’s information, and failing to meet the higher data protection standards required for biometric data.
6. <https://legalvision.co.uk/data-privacy-it/key-legal-considerations-using-facial-recognition-technology/> - Compliance with the UK GDPR is essential for any business handling personal data, especially when using facial recognition technology (FRT). Failing to meet these obligations can result in severe consequences, including fines of up to £17.5 million or 4% of global annual revenue. Before implementing FRT, conducting a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) is critical. A DPIA helps identify and mitigate risks to individuals' privacy by assessing the necessity and proportionality of deploying FRT, evaluating potential privacy risks, and implementing measures to mitigate them. Given the complexity and sensitivity of FRT, seeking expert legal advice is advisable to ensure compliance and avoid significant legal challenges.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/26/facial-recognition-cameras-in-uk-retail-chain-challenged-by-privacy-group> - Privacy group Big Brother Watch has submitted a complaint against Southern Co-operative’s use of facial recognition cameras in 35 stores across southern England, claiming it is 'Orwellian' and unlawful. The surveillance system uses novel technology and highly invasive processing of personal data, creating a biometric profile of every visitor to stores where its cameras are installed. The system stores images of individuals who have been 'identified and evidenced' as offenders, including those who have been banned from the store, and the images are held for a year from the last offence evidenced. Individuals can submit a subject access request to check if this applies to them, the chain said.