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A public dialogue on Artificial Intelligence in Policing



Thinks
— Insight & Strategy —


Home Office

sciencewise 

Background

How can Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools change the way our police forces work? And what do the public hope, fear, expect and want from a future where AI is part of the policing toolkit? Exploring the use of AI tools in policing is a priority for the current Policing Minister. And AI more broadly is a key focus for UK Government, from supporting economic growth, to new regulation. This dialogue set out to provide new evidence about what, if anything, the public want from AI in policing.

The use of AI in policing can be a polarising topic. There is already a range of public opinions, from scepticism and mistrust to excitement, on AI, technology, and policing separately, which inform views on AI in policing.

While existing public opinion data shows that more people feel positive about the potential of AI than negative,* it also shows that many have a limited understanding of what AI is. We also find plenty of people with concerns, and even those who feel generally positive tend to see the mainstreaming of AI tools across society as inevitable rather than

an active choice. When it comes to particular ways of using AI, we see greater caution about sensitive settings, such as school and healthcare. We also see concerns raised about data privacy and security when it comes to the datasets AI needs to access.

In terms of public perceptions of the police, high profile cases of failings in particular areas has led to a trend towards distrust from the UK public. Views on the police differ across demographics,** including race and sex, and are strongly related to personal experiences.

As we understood through initial engagement with stakeholders, when it comes to using AI in policing, there are tensions between the potential improvements it could make to policing and concerns regarding how its use could contribute to bias or unlawful discrimination. It is also a relatively new topic, one that currently lacks substantial evidence on public perceptions.

Understanding public perceptions of the topic should lead to better, more informed policymaking that is more likely to work in practice. This could inform operational decisions made by police forces – particularly crucial at a time when AI implementation is being prioritised, and public perceptions of AI and policing are still being formed.

*<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-to-data-and-ai-tracker-survey-wave-4/public-attitudes-to-data-and-ai-tracker-survey-wave-4-report#:~:text=UK%20adults%20have%20mixed%20perceptions%20about%20AI's%20impact%20on%20society,for%20society%20and%20them%20personally.>

**<https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/IOPC-public-perceptions-tracker-report-2022-23.pdf>



What we did



This project was commissioned by the Home Office to understand public perceptions of AI in policing to enable better policymaking. The work was supported by UK Research and Innovation’s Sciencewise programme for high quality public dialogue and carried out by the independent research agency Thinks Insight and Strategy.

The ultimate objective was to **inform policy development** by understanding public views on:

- Specific AI use cases in policing, including some that are being trialled, and others that are theoretical.
- Governance, monitoring, safety and accountability for the use of AI in policing.
- Opportunities and challenges for integrating AI into policing, exploring potential trade offs such as improvements to policing practice vs potential risks.

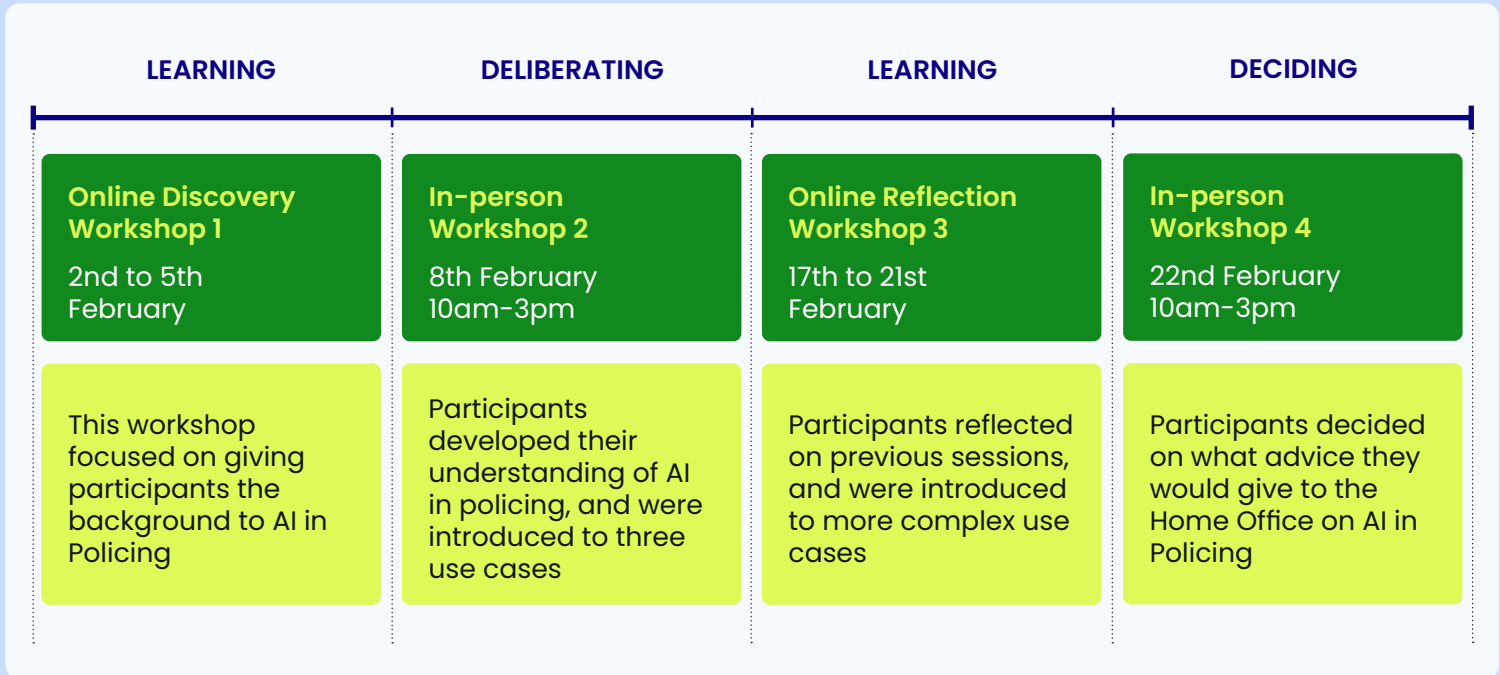
A public dialogue

The project engaged a **diverse and inclusive group of people**, including those most likely to be disproportionately impacted by the police. And it also aimed to **raise awareness of participatory methods** (like public dialogue) within the Home Office and police forces.

A **public dialogue** was used to explore this policy area because it is a method well suited to topics with low levels of existing knowledge.

58 members of the public took part in a mix of online and in person workshops, working through this process of learning, deliberating and deciding. The participants were selected to be broadly reflective of the populations of England and Wales with enhanced representation of some groups (e.g. those likely to be more impacted by AI in policing).

Overview of the process



Why public dialogue?

Dialogue is an approach that provides insight into how and why people form or shift opinions when exposed to new information or perspectives. It enables participants to discuss the issues and develop their thinking together before coming to a view.

Unlike quantitative surveys, which capture static snapshots of views, or qualitative focus groups that explore surface-level attitudes, deliberative dialogue methods reveal the evolution of participants' thinking.

Participants engage in structured dialogue, consider trade-offs, and grapple with complexity mirroring real-world decision-making. This approach uncovers more considered, informed views, helping to understand not just what people think, but how they arrive there.

It's particularly useful for complex or contentious topics where more spontaneous reactions don't tell the full story.

Dialogue is about understanding public judgement, not public opinion.



What we learned

There was a huge diversity of views among participants, some of which were in conflict with one another. These findings summarise participants' initial views through their views of examples of AI in policing, to their advice to the Home Office on how AI in policing should work.

Participants' initial views



Starting points: Participants had rarely considered AI in policing specifically, but their views of the separate topics of AI, technology, and policing were important in shaping their responses throughout the process.



Views on technology: While technology was felt to improve communication and be convenient, concerns around disinformation, addiction, and declining social interaction were also prominent.



Views on AI: Participants saw AI as having real potential, particularly in healthcare, but expressed apprehension over job displacement, data security, and insufficient regulation.



Views on policing: Views on policing were shaped by personal experiences and media exposure, leading to varying levels of trust.



Views on AI in policing: Initial attitudes toward AI in policing acknowledged its potential to enhance efficiency, but concerns persisted regarding bias, job losses, and lack of oversight.



Necessities for support: From the outset of the process, participants emphasised the need for transparency, regulation, accountability and safeguards to ensure AI supports policing without undermining human judgment – these underpinned participants' advice to the Home Office and police forces at the end of the dialogue.

Exploring different uses of AI

To help dialogue participants understand the range of potential ways in which AI could be used in policing we presented use cases, identified in discussion with stakeholders, that range from currently being trialled, to hypothetical. They covered:



Handling 101 calls

AI answers 101 calls, with the ability to give advice about non-emergencies and signpost or fast track callers to appropriate organisations



Summarising data

AI identifies key points and patterns in large information sets from multiple sources, and summarises them. For example, when investigating a crime, the police may need to review significant volumes of CCTV footage and evidential statements



Predictive policing

AI gathers information and patterns from existing data to assist police resourcing decisions, such as police deployments to crime hot spots or providing oversight of likely reoffending scenarios to help with offender management.

Outstanding questions for participants

There were core questions that participants feel need to be answered to feel confident that AI is being implemented appropriately in policing.

What does ethical look like?

Participants were undecided on whether AI would counter or exacerbate human bias - and bias ingrained within police datasets. While there were arguments that AI would simply bolster already existing biases in police data, there were also counter arguments suggesting AI could work against human biases.

What's the evidence base?

Participants expressed fear that there was not enough evidence that AI works effectively to confidently involve AI in a high- risk area like policing.

What about job losses?

Participants said AI should not be introduced to policing at the cost of humans losing their jobs.

Who controls personal data?

There were some discussions that came up throughout the process around who would own the data AI collects, with particular concerns around private company ownership and the risk of data breaches.

Is this too much, too fast?

There was a consistent and strong feeling of the inevitability of AI across society, and the feeling that AI is happening without the public's involvement and approval, something the opportunity to be involved in this dialogue highlighted to participants.

"I feel uncomfortable because this is already being done and I had no idea. I feel like we haven't had a chance to consent to it."



Participant, London





Participants' advice to the Home Office and police forces

After learning about how AI might be used in policing and deliberating on the implications, participants produced advice for policy makers at the Home Office and for policing to consider. This advice focused on three key themes:

1 Oversight and accountability

- The public should be made aware of how oversight of AI in policing works, who is involved, and what happens when something goes wrong.
- AI should always be coupled with a human overseer to check AI inputs and be accountable for the outputs.
- AI's performance should be continually monitored.
- The police should maintain high levels of data security, and information being analysed by AI should be stored safely and securely.
- There should be limited political involvement in interpreting and acting on the output of AI uses.
- The police should ensure national consistency in accountability rather than each police force having their own approach.
- The police should consider a range of diverse perspectives to help guard against bias.

2 Maximising accuracy and minimising bias

- Both data going into and out of AI systems should be audited, including training data.
- The police should sense-check AI output against other information – for example, a police officer's personal experiences from engaging with offenders.
- The same systems should be used in the same way across all police forces.

3 Ensuring transparency in implementation

- AI should have a phased introduction to policing, with clear communication to the public about what it is being used for.
- The resources saved by using AI should be applied to other aspects of policing – i.e. time freed up by AI use should be put towards greater community engagement and more frontline policing, rather than financial savings.
- There should be consequences for failure, transparency when failures occur, and clear consequences for misuse.

"I would say that the whole purpose of this is to improve things, and the resource saved is applied elsewhere – The net of this is that you have an improved policing system overall."



Participant, Durham



It's been great that there's an open dialogue, it's great that the police and the Home Office are listening to members of the public in order to co-create and collaborate, to really use AI effectively going forward

Participant, London



What's next?

The Home Office will be using the data from this dialogue to inform the policy for AI in policing. Going forward, the Home Office and CoLab will be considering where else they could be using participatory approaches like this to establish deeper engagement and inform policy making. Public dialogue like this can be used by the Home Office as an effective means of moving beyond top-of-mind reactions from the public. Instead gaining deeper, more informed perspectives on other complex issues.

The full report for this project can be found [here](#).

