Home Office secretly backs facial recognition technology to curb shoplifting

Home Office officials have drawn up secret plans to lobby the independent privacy regulator in an attempt to push the rollout of controversial facial recognition technology into high street shops and supermarkets, internal government minutes seen by the Observer reveal. The covert strategy was agreed during a closed-door meeting on 8 March between policing minister Chris Philp, senior Home Office officials and the private firm Facewatch, whose facial recognition cameras have provoked fierce opposition after being installed in shops. In a development that ignores critics who claim the technology breaches human rights and is biased, particularly against darker-skinned people, minutes of the meeting appear to show Home Office officials agreeing to write to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) advocating the merits of facial recognition technology in tackling "retail crime". Mark Johnson, advocacy manager of the campaign group Big Brother Watch, said: "The Home Office must urgently answer questions about this meeting, which appears to have led officials to lean on the ICO in order to favour a firm that sells highly invasive facial recognition technology. "Government ministers should strive to protect human rights, not cosy up to private companies whose products pose serious threats to civil liberties in the UK." The minutes of the previously undisclosed meeting reveal that Philp – appointed policing minister by Rishi Sunak last October – and Simon Gordon, the founder of Facewatch, discussed "retail crime and the benefits of privately owned facial recognition technology". Later, as part of an action plan agreed during the meeting, it is noted: "Officials to draft a letter to ICO setting out the effects of retail crime." In addition, Philp would "consider a speech to bring the benefits of FR [facial recognition] to the fore". It remains unclear precisely what contact followed between the Home Office and the privacy regulator regarding Facewatch. However, the minutes do suggest that Philp is aware that any attempt to apply pressure on the independent regulator might be ineffective. "CP [Chris Philp] reiterated that the ICO are independent and he can't attempt to change their rulings or opinion," state the minutes, obtained by Big Brother Watch through a freedom of information (FoI) request. Facial recognition technology has provoked widespread criticism and scrutiny, with the European Union moving to ban the technology in public spaces through its upcoming artificial intelligence act. However the UK's data protection and information bill proposes to abolish the role of the government-appointed surveillance camera commissioner along with the requirement for a surveillance camera code of practice. "The UK should seek to emulate the European artificial intelligence act, which would place a ban on the use of facial recognition for surveillance purposes in all public spaces," added Johnson. Advocates of biometric surveillance technology installed on retailers' premises point to the escalating issue of retail crime, with UK

shop thefts more than doubling in the past six years, reaching 8m in 2022. Last week the Co-op warned that some communities could become "no-go" areas for shops due to surging levels of retail crime. However, the use of Facewatch to tackle the issue is deeply contentious. In April, Sports Direct's parent company defended its decision to use Facewatch cameras – which check faces against a watch list – in its shops. Mike Ashley's Frasers Group said the cameras had cut crime, after 50 MPs and peers backed a letter opposing its use of live facial recognition technology. Gordon, who founded Facewatch in 2010, said: "We provide each individual business with a service that will reduce crime in their stores and make their staff safer. "Every store has 10 to 20 people who just constantly steal from that store. And the store knows who they are. They've been preventing theft for years – this isn't a new thing. All this is doing is using new technology to stop it. One of our big retailers using it has a 25% [crime] reduction compared to stores not using Facewatch," he added. Facial recognition software has been used by South Wales police and London's Metropolitan police during events like the Notting Hill Carnival and, more recently, during the coronation. In 2020, appeal court judges ruled that previous trials by South Wales police of the technology were unlawful and unethical, although the force continues to use the technology. Last month, the Met revealed the results of its review into the technology's effectiveness and claimed "no statistically significant bias in relation to race and gender, and the chance of a false match is just 1 in 6,000 people who pass the camera". Asked about the ministerial support for Facewatch, a Home Office spokesperson said: "Shops are at the heart of our communities, and it is important that businesses are free to trade without fear of crime or disorder. "That is why we continue to work closely with retail businesses, security representatives, trade associations and policing to ensure our response to retail crime is as robust as it can be. "New technologies like facial recognition can help businesses protect their customers, staff and stock by actively managing shoplifting and crime."