

# Ex-commissioner for facial recognition tech joins Facewatch firm he approved

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The recently-departed watchdog in charge of monitoring facial recognition technology has joined the private firm he controversially approved, paving the way for the mass roll-out of biometric surveillance cameras in high streets across the country. In a move critics have dubbed an “outrageous conflict of interest”, Professor Fraser Sampson, former biometrics and surveillance camera commissioner, has joined Facewatch as a non-executive director. Sampson left his watchdog role on 31 October, with Companies House records showing he was registered as a company director at Facewatch the following day, 1 November. Campaigners claim this might mean he was negotiating his Facewatch contract while in post, and have urged the advisory committee on business appointments to investigate if it may have “compromised his work in public office”. [see footnote] Facewatch uses biometric cameras to check faces against a watch list and, despite widespread concern over the technology, has received backing from the Home Office, and has already been introduced in hundreds of high-street shops and supermarkets. Mark Johnson, advocacy manager at Big Brother Watch, said the hiring of Sampson painted a “murky picture.” He added: “It cannot be acceptable for those in taxpayer-paid oversight roles to negotiate contracts with the very companies they scrutinise while still in post.” “There is no specific law regulating the use of facial recognition surveillance in the UK. Given that this Orwellian technology is already operating in a legal vacuum, we cannot have a revolving door between those tasked with scrutinising the use of facial recognition surveillance and those selling it. When the independence of public officials is compromised by private interests, it undermines public trust in our institutions.” However, Sampson said that after the government proposed abolishing his post, he wrote publicly to the home secretary on 1 August, giving three months’ notice, after which he received a formal approach to join Facewatch. “I notified the Home Office and put in place specific measures to ensure the avoidance of any potential conflict of interest, however limited that potential might be. I am satisfied that no such conflict arose,” said Sampson. He added: “I also wrote to chief scientific adviser professor Jennifer Rubin, advising of my intention to take up the appointment in November. Having complied fully with my terms of appointment, and having received no conditions or restrictions from the Home Office, I was free to take up the position on 1 November.” Sampson’s move may bring scrutiny of decisions made during his tenure, a period during which Facewatch became the first facial recognition business to receive the watchdog’s backing. In March this year, Sampson awarded Facewatch its certification mark for meeting all requirements of the surveillance camera code of practice specifically for the use of live facial recognition. Big Brother Watch pointed out that Sampson’s decision to certify Facewatch came during an investigation by the Information Commissioner’s Office which had “identified various areas of concern” over the use of

people's personal data. It also came at a time of rising privacy and human rights concern over facial recognition technology, with the EU seeking to ban the technology in public spaces through legislation. Opponents of the technology claim it is inaccurate and biased, particularly against darker-skinned people. In a statement, Sampson added: "Joining Facewatch was an easy decision to take. They have invited challenge, reviewed practice and policy and responded promptly to ensure their operations are lawful and ethical." Nick Fisher, chairman of Facewatch, said: "Facewatch sought to recruit Professor Sampson to act as a critical friend. His appointment further strengthens our commitment to responsible and lawful facial recognition to prevent crime and people becoming victims of crime." • This article was amended on 15 December 2023. An earlier version said it was understood that the advisory committee on business appointments (Acoba) was considering the issue raised with it by campaigners. In fact, Acoba has told us that such public appointments as that of the biometrics commissioner are outside its remit for consideration.