THE POLICE FOUNDATION
The UK's policing think tank

FOCUS GROUPS ON POLICING AND TECHNOLOGY

1. Introduction and approach

This report synthesises findings from three London focus groups in June 2026, with a total of 36 participants, on the use of technology by the Metropolitan Police Service (the Met). All three groups covered the same two broad discussion areas: **1. general perceptions of policing in London; and 2. perceptions of policing technologies, including live facial recognition (LFR), ANPR, drones, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and CCTV.**

Overall, the discussions showed a public that is often frustrated with day-to-day policing, but not anti-police in principle. Participants broadly wanted the police to succeed and most supported greater use of technology, but only if it was seen to be effective, proportionate and accountable. In particular they were concerned about how it is governed, explained and used.

2. Executive summary

- Across all three groups, the dominant view was that the Met is under-resourced, stretched and inconsistent in its response, especially for everyday crime such as shoplifting, phone theft and local disorder.
- Participants frequently linked poor policing performance with wider justice problems: poor deterrence, overloaded prisons and a sense that offenders face few consequences.
- Visible policing still mattered strongly to many, especially older participants, who associated foot patrols with reassurance and deterrence. In contrast, younger participants felt wary rather than reassured by visible police presence.
- There was broad support for technology in policing. ANPR and CCTV were generally normalised and accepted. Drones also attracted relatively little concern.
- Live facial recognition triggered the most debate. Support often depended on context, transparency, signage, safeguards and clarity about what data is stored, by whom, and for how long.
- AI was treated as inevitable and potentially useful, especially for search, pattern recognition and investigative support. However, participants consistently rejected the idea of AI replacing human judgement.
- The main ask from the police when it came to technology was that they "show us clearly how it works, prove it is useful, explain the safeguards, and keep a human accountable".

3. Findings: General perceptions of policing in London

3.1 Under-resourcing, slow response and everyday ineffectiveness (majority view)

The clearest shared theme across all three groups was a perception that policing in London is struggling to respond effectively to everyday crime. Group 1 described policing as “under-resourced”, “stretched”, “invisible” and “bias[ed]”. Group 2 also characterised the police as under-resourced, inconsistent, slow and unreliable. In Group 3, participants repeatedly returned to incidents of phone theft, shoplifting and antisocial behaviour as examples of a service that either arrives too late or is not expected to attend at all.

> *“I think it’s just, since then you just feel like, what’s the point sometimes? Like if you’ve got your phone stolen, I don’t even see a point in reporting it because nothing’s going to get done. Or, you know, I go into my local co-op and people are just stealing all the time… the police are never called… there’s no point in, because they’re not going to come anyway.”*
>
> *“It happened to me. It happened at Kings Cross in daytime, 2 o’clock in the afternoon… and the guy’s on the bike, ballied up* [wearing a balaclava]*, he’s got an electric bike, he’s gone, my phone’s gone. There’s no way of catching him… They* [the police] *were pretty good in calling me and checking on me and asking if I wanted trauma therapy… But they never found the phone, never got the phone back.”*

These extracts show confidence and trust in policing is linked to practical judgments about whether reporting a crime leads to an outcome. Participants often described a mismatch between the visibility of crime and the absence of enforcement. They felt that the police either could not or would not act on what Londoners saw happening in plain sight.

> *“There’s no deterrent… nothing’s going to happen to them… if nothing does go to court, more often than not, it’s a suspended sentence… low level stuff.”*
>
> *“It sends out a real bad message that people can do whatever they want.”*

This perceived weakness of the police has consequences – people see crime go unchallenged, infer that reporting is futile, and then decide not to report in future.

3.2 Visibility, reassurance and uneven presence

A second major theme was policing visibility. Older participants in Group 1 explicitly contrasted the present with an earlier era of “bobbies on the beat”, while Group 2 participants did not know that London had fewer police officers than 10 years ago, but the fact did not surprise them. Group 3 participants reflected on the disappearance of everyday local contact with police. Participants said they felt reassured by seeing officers on foot patrol, but they said that this happens rarely. They said that when they did see officers, they were keeping order at major events and were not tackling local crime problems.

"You would never see a policeman again on that street… there isn't that visibility. I mean, obviously I'm getting on now, but I do remember the policeman on the bike when I was a child. I see policemen in cars and, you know, if there's a sports event, you see them all lined up… but not just sort of patrolling in a more casual way."

"It is good… you know, somebody's controlling the area… you hope it's a deterrent. But again… they're walking in threes and fours and it seems a waste of resources."

This theme contained one of the clearest generational differences. The majority – especially older participants – see visible foot patrols as a sign of order, care and deterrence. However, younger participants in Group 1 were more cautious and less reassured when seeing police officers on the street.

This distinction is important as it shows "more visibility" is not a universally experienced good, even though it remains a powerful symbol of effective policing for many. Participants in Group 2 were concerned by response times with several comments about a slow response to incidents they had witnessed.

3.3 Criticism tempered by sympathy for police constraints

Even though they were dissatisfied with what the police did, participants were not hostile to policing as an institution. There was widespread recognition that policing is under-resourced and that they were often doing their best in circumstances where the police response had to be rationed or prioritised.

Group 2 participants, for example, said they understood that the police had to do their best with limited resources. This was consistent across ages and all three groups – the participants were dissatisfied but they understood why the service wasn't meeting their expectations, so were more despondent than critical.

"I'm just thinking the police haven't got the funding as well… if that's an issue."

"That's down to prisons. Prisons are just overloaded. So therefore, even if nothing does go to court… it's a suspended sentence… and that's not the police's issue, that's a government issue."

Across the groups there was a recurring effort to separate the work of frontline officers from wider structural problems such as funding, demand levels, management and the courts.

Criticism of the Met co-existed with an understanding that policing alone cannot prevent crime and bring offenders to justice if the wider criminal justice system does not work properly. In practical terms, this means communication about performance may be needed to address the relationship between policing, charging, prisons and courts.

3.4 Culture, discrimination and internal standards (minority but strongly felt)

Some participants saw problems in the culture of the Met itself, which shaped their trust in it as an institution. Group 1 notes include references to antisemitism, dismissive behaviour and perceived bias in police responses. Group 3 included a blunt discussion about racism, vetting and the types of people attracted into the police.

"Controversially, the fact that it's still institutionally racist. Even today… nothing's changed."

"They have issues within their own force… there are police officers that shouldn't be in the police… they have to investigate their own people too and who they take in."

"I also think… the whistleblowing process within the police needs to be improved, because… there's a lot of pressure on not reporting, not telling or whatever."

These contributions suggest that for a minority of participants, legitimacy is not only about effectiveness but also about fairness, standards and internal accountability. Where this concern exists, technology alone is unlikely to improve trust unless accompanied by evidence of strong governance, improved vetting and credible independent scrutiny.

4. Findings: Technology, surveillance and public legitimacy

4.1 Broad support for policing technology in principle

Across all three groups, the overall direction of opinion was supportive of police use of technology. Group 2 participants were particularly relaxed about LFR, drones and ANPR, and several said explicitly that they wanted the police to have the best technology available. Group 1 was somewhat more cautious, but still broadly supportive. Group 3 said that increased technological adaptation was inevitable and necessary if policing is to keep up with modern crime and constrained resources.

"We have to expect technology to play a part in quite a bit… I agree. I just think it needs to be controlled."

"The question is not if the police should or should not use AI. The question is, do the police have already a framework to correctly use AI? There is no area in our life that AI won't jump in or hasn't jumped in."

People were clear that policing would and should use digital tools. The more important question for participants was whether those tools were proportionate, understandable and governed well.

Participants in Group 2 assumed that policing was using AI and were supportive of it being deployed to support investigations. A scenario where AI was used to offer rapid translation or to support cold case reviews was welcomed by participants.

4.2 CCTV and ANPR were normalised; LFR was more contested

Participants distinguished clearly between technologies. ANPR and CCTV attracted relatively high levels of acceptance. They were widely understood as already embedded in daily life and often seen as targeted, familiar and proportionate. For ANPR, people knew of it or had heard of it, and there were no concerns about its use and people understood it was targeted.

In contrast, LFR provoked more uncertainty and more active debate, not because there was blanket opposition, but because it felt more novel, more personal and was less well understood. There was awareness that LFR existed – and was also in use in the private retail environment – and participants in Group 2 had seen the deployments in Brixton and Croydon.

"In terms of the number of cameras in London… the more the better."

"I don't know where it is. I can imagine instances where it's probably needed, maybe in airports and things like that… but… it needs to be kind of treated very carefully… it's just about privacy, isn't it? It's about being on a bus, you know, in real time, having your data clocked."

This distinction shows that "technology acceptance" is not one single attitude. Rather the public are more likely to accept technologies that feel properly controlled and familiar, such as ANPR or CCTV. In contrast, technologies that involve biometric identification in public space, especially in real time, are more likely to trigger questions about necessity, proportionality and data practice.

This broad support for surveillance was tempered by a desire to be informed about how technologies are being used and what results they are achieving. Group 2 were keen to hear more about LFR's track record in actually finding wanted persons or securing positive outcomes, and did not trust statistics alone – they wanted the story told with case studies of real successes.

4.3 Safety versus privacy: a live tension rather than a simple split

The safety/privacy trade-off surfaced in all three groups and featured in almost every topic for discussion. For one set of participants, the argument was straightforward: if technology helps catch offenders the trade-off is justified – after all if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. For another set, the desire to maintain their privacy was not evidence of guilt but a basic principle linked to identity, dignity and future misuse of data.

"I have the view, if you've got nothing to hide, then what's the problem?"

"Your face is still your data and it's being used in ways to manipulate us… it's still your identity."

"I think there is a need for it, but… having a blanket use of it everywhere in the city isn't right. I think it can be used in certain ways."

The majority leaned toward conditional acceptance of surveillance if there was a credible public safety benefit. However, this support narrowed when the discussion moved from abstract crime control to specific public places, indefinite data retention, or the possibility of systems expanding beyond their original purpose.

4.4 Data handling, private companies and cyber insecurity

Questions about who holds and secures data were central, especially in Groups 1 and 3. Many participants were more comfortable with police or public bodies holding data than private companies, but this was still dependent on there being adequate transparency and safeguards in place. Discussion in Group 3 made clear that privacy concerns were often grounded in lived experience of cyber breaches and misuse.

"The private company is definitely worse… they are connected with finance and profit."

"The organisation that I work for had a cyber-attack a couple of years ago. My payment details, my passport, my address, everything is online. Since then, the amount of spamming

through e-mail, through text, through phone calls has increased… It just takes the wrong people to get hold of it."

"It just takes… a government to change. I know this sounds very sort of conspiracy theory, but you can envisage a situation where… people [are treated differently] based on their race or beliefs and things like that. So you do have to be careful."

These views suggest that concerns over data governance are linked to real fears about hacking, misuse, commercial exploitation, and political change. As a result, assurances about data security, retention and deletion are likely to be central to legitimacy.

Group 2 did not fully understand that data (facial scans) captured by LFR deployments was not retained, or that when it was, it was only matched against a police 'watch-list' rather than a general pool of images (either from official sources or from open source: e.g. DVLA photos or social media accounts). It was unclear whether participants would support broader use of facial recognition using such image databases.

4.5 AI was seen as useful, inevitable and risky

Artificial Intelligence (AI) produced some of the most sophisticated discussion in the groups. Participants generally assumed that the police either already use AI or inevitably will do so, especially for searching records, finding patterns, linking evidence, building investigative leads and improving efficiency. At the same time, concern centred on bias, false confidence, and the risk that officers could defer to AI outputs as if they were objective truth.

"Technology can't completely be trusted… if there's somebody watching that… they'll have more success in like actually who they're supposed to be. So AI, the technology can't completely be trusted."

"I think what you're saying about policy and sort of having that framework in place, I think is spot on. I think quite often technology is running really far ahead of the policy and that gets put in place almost too late."

"You need to combine facial [recognition], AI, human effort there, all together, create a framework… We should validate with other sources… we don't trust only AI… there should be clear framework, clear process about how it's used."

In Group 1 participants expressed concerns around officers deferring too heavily to AI in high-pressure contexts. This was a notable point of convergence across groups: participants did not reject AI outright, but they consistently resisted automation replacing human judgement. They wanted AI used as an assistive tool, not as the final arbiter of truth. There was also a recognition that AI could be more efficient, and that the cash-strapped police might need it to make their resources go further.

Some in Group 2 were more wary of AI being used to target individuals (either as offenders or victims) in a 'predictive' capacity, but they could see the merits. There was no strong objection to the technology on grounds of sovereignty – for most it was not a factor which AI companies, and from which countries, were being utilised by the police.

4.6 Human accountability was the key condition of support

More than any single technical safeguard, participants wanted a human being to remain responsible for interpretation, decision-making and accountability. This arose in discussion of LFR, AI, court evidence and fast-moving operational decisions. The “human in the loop” was seen as a vital way of preserving accountability when technologies make mistakes.

> *“I think they should be both like the technology and the person… so AI, the technology can’t completely be trusted. What about the human? Can the human be trusted? I think it depends. If there’s somebody like to manage all of it together, I think they should be.”*
>
> *“There should be someone within a police service… whose job it is to collect evidence and to go through all the statements… If AI has been used in any part of that evidence forming… [they] need to go through and check everything.”*

This is one of the strongest consensus points. Even participants who were highly supportive of surveillance technologies wanted identifiable human responsibility and clear lines of accountability that led back to people as responsible decision-makers.

4.7 Drones and other technologies: practical acceptance, lower concern

Drones generated less controversy than LFR or AI. Participants mainly saw them as an efficient extension of existing aerial surveillance capacity: faster and cheaper (and quieter) than helicopters, useful for events, searches and hard-to-reach locations. Concerns were more practical, for example around London airspace, rather than fundamental moral objections.

> *“They’re cheaper than helicopters… good to get to places that you can’t reach.”*
>
> *“If there is a problem in a certain area, I think it can get there in minutes. And I think the footage on those things is quite amazing.”*

This lower level of concern suggests that technologies perceived as task-specific and instrumentally useful may attract less public resistance than technologies involving biometric identification or opaque algorithmic decision support. Participants in Group 2 were not concerned that the police might regularly use drones to keep watch, rather than just as an emergency response tool.

4.8. Citizen evidence: support in principle, but concern about fairness and boundaries

A distinct finding, most clearly visible in Group 1, was that views on citizen digital evidence were more divided than other areas. One participant described receiving penalty points after a cyclist recorded her using a phone while stationary in traffic and submitted the footage to police; although she accepted that she had technically done something wrong, she and several others felt it was unfair that a member of the public could effectively trigger enforcement in this way. At least half of the group agreed that the public should not have an unrestricted role in gathering or submitting evidence to police.

At the same time, participants accepted that members of the public may sometimes be the only people able to capture an incident safely, and said they would themselves submit video, audio or photographic evidence where it could help police respond to wrongdoing. The disagreement,

therefore, was less about whether citizen evidence could ever be useful, and more about where the boundary should be between legitimate witnessing and vigilantism.

This suggests that citizen evidence occupies a particularly sensitive space because it blurs the line between public protection, surveillance, and informal enforcement by peers. Participants were especially uncomfortable where they felt the public were acting without clear rules, or where police appeared to rely on citizen-submitted material without transparent standards for how it would be assessed.

There is a strong case for a clear public framework setting out when such evidence is appropriate, how it will be reviewed, and how newer technologies such as wearable recording devices should be governed. This would help address the tension participants identified between the value of public cooperation and the risk of creating an unregulated culture of peer surveillance.

5. Participant suggestions and implications for practice

Across the three groups, participants offered a clear set of practical suggestions aimed at making police use of technology more legitimate.

- Explain technology in plain language. Participants repeatedly said the police do not educate the public enough on what technologies do, what they do not do, how systems work, and what actually gets retained. Tell stories using real life cases.
- Provide regular transparency reporting. People wanted more than headline statistics: they wanted localised examples, evidence of impact, numbers of matches or deployments, and clear explanations of benefit.
- Use signage where LFR is deployed. Even participants who did not personally mind surveillance often supported visible signage as a minimum transparency measure.
- Clarify who holds data and for how long. This was especially important where private vendors or third-party platforms are involved.
- Build in deletion and retention controls. Some participants wanted rights to access relevant data held about them and confidence that non-matched or unnecessary data is not retained.
- Keep a human in the loop. Support fell sharply where people imagined technology replacing human scrutiny or becoming the sole basis for action, especially if this meant enforcement/sanctions.
- Create or strengthen independent oversight. Several participants valued the idea of an independent advisory or regulatory body that can review deployments, procurement and impacts.
- For citizen-submitted evidence, create clearer frameworks. There were polarised views on public recordings and submissions to police; people wanted guidance on when such material is appropriate and how it should be used.
- Do not rely on technology to repair trust on its own. Where concerns related to police culture, vetting, bias or misconduct, technology was not seen as a substitute for organisational reform.
- Technology is not an answer to wider resource needs: the participants felt that technology could improve capability, but it could not make up for the lack of police presence on its own, and that overall the service was not funded well enough.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the focus groups suggest a pragmatic public mood. Participants were generally frustrated by what they saw as an absence of effective policing, but they understood the context and everyone thought policing was struggling due to lack of resources and wider CJS failings. However

dissatisfaction did not translate into broad opposition to the police, or to cynicism about them using more technology. Rather, most wanted the Met to use effective tools to respond quicker, to investigate crime, manage limited resources and improve public safety.

Nevertheless, support was almost always conditional. The public in these groups wanted reassurance about purpose, boundaries, governance and accountability. ANPR, CCTV and drones were more accepted because they were better understood or more normalised in daily experience. LFR and AI raised more searching questions. The public felt less clear about the use cases and less comfortable about the rules. As such they were more concerned about their reach, their impact on privacy and about possible future misuse.

The clearest implication is that whether the public believe police use of technology is legitimate will depend not only on effectiveness, but on explainability. Participants wanted the police to show that technologies work, to explain how they are being used and for what ends, to disclose who is involved, to make safeguards visible and to ensure that ultimate responsibility always rests with humans. In short, the central issue is trust: which is dependent on the technology being used competently, effectively and proportionately by institutions that are willing to be open about that use.