



# POLICING AND DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE:

UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL  
FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

THE  
POLICE  
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# POLICING AND DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE: UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

**Ruth Halkon**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Digital technologies are transforming the relationship between citizens, evidence and policing. Smart doorbells, journey cameras, mobile phones, wearable devices and connected home technologies now allow members of the public to record incidents, preserve evidence and share material with police in ways that were previously impossible.**

This report examines the rise of digital citizen evidence: digital material generated by members of the public through citizen-owned or citizen-initiated technologies and voluntarily shared with police, either proactively or in response to a police request.

The report argues that **digital citizen evidence** represents the latest evolution of a long-standing principle: that public safety is a shared responsibility, underpinned by public participation, legitimacy and policing by consent. The public are already generating and sharing digital evidence at scale. The question is no longer whether citizens will participate, but whether policing can develop the governance, capabilities and relationships needed to use that evidence effectively, ethically and at scale.

Digital citizen evidence offers significant opportunities. It can:

- Support investigations and safeguarding
- Improve prevention and deterrence
- Increase public agency and reassurance
- Identify evidence that would otherwise be missed
- Strengthen public participation in policing
- Contribute to wider public safety outcomes, including road safety

However, these opportunities will only be realised if policing develops the systems, standards and safeguards needed to manage digital citizen evidence effectively. Moreover it also poses many risks. Irresponsible use can lead to privacy breaches, discrimination and contribute to mass surveillance.

At present, practice remains fragmented. Operation Snap, a scheme enabling road users to submit footage of driving offences to police, provides the most developed example of digital citizen evidence in policing, but implementation remains uneven and examples of best practice are not consistently adopted across forces.

Beyond roads policing, approaches have largely developed organically, resulting in inconsistent reporting routes, variable feedback, interoperability challenges and significant postcode variation.

The central finding of this report is that digital citizen evidence should be recognised as a core capability of modern policing. Failure to do so risks missed opportunities for public safety, declining public confidence and increasing reliance on informal or unregulated forms of accountability.

Wider society also has a responsibility to promote the safe, fair and ethical use of these devices. Without the appropriate safeguards, these technologies can lead to privacy breaches, discrimination and contribute to a mass surveillance chilling effect which can undermine the very safety gains they aim to achieve.

If delivered successfully, digital citizen evidence would become a trusted, nationally governed capability that:

- Enables citizens to share evidence easily and responsibly
- Improves investigations, safeguarding and prevention
- Supports road safety and wider public safety objectives
- Protects privacy and civil liberties
- Provides transparency and meaningful feedback
- Uses automation to support, not replace, professional judgement
- Reduces postcode variation
- Delivers measurable public value and public safety benefits

In short, the public would be able to share the right evidence with the right people in the right way, and policing would have the capability to use that evidence effectively and fairly.

## WHAT THE PUBLIC TOLD US

The findings from the nationally representative YouGov survey conducted for this report show that citizen-owned surveillance technologies are now a routine part of everyday life for millions of people. Moreover, they are increasingly shaping how the public thinks about safety, accountability and their relationship with policing.

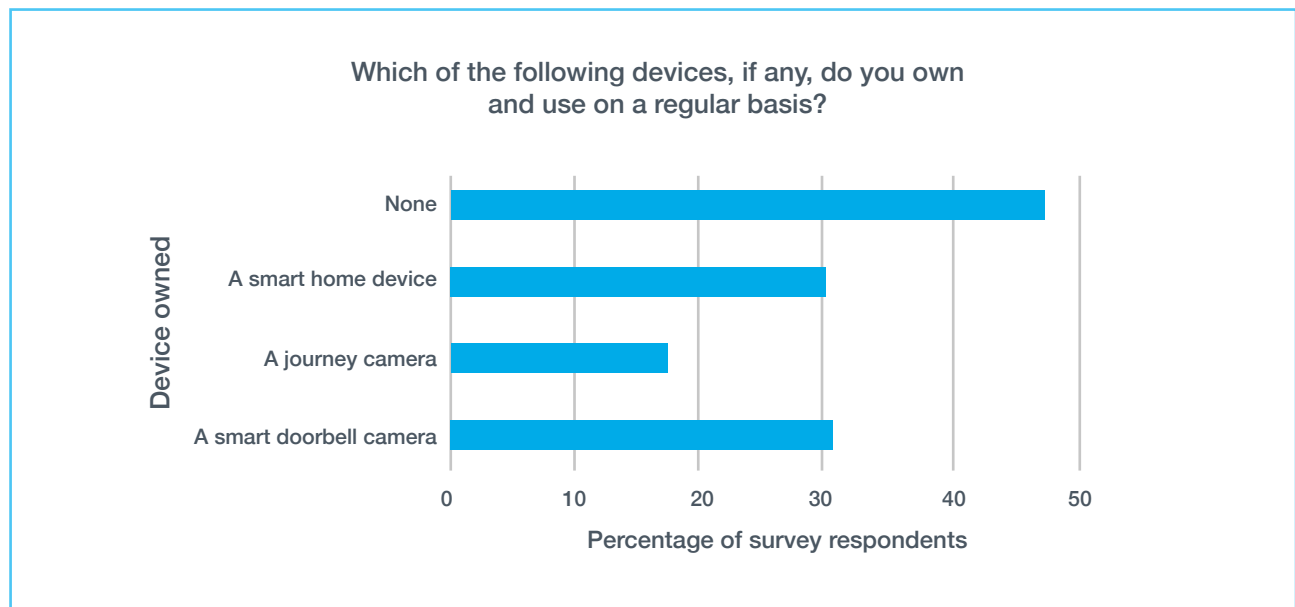
The survey results show:

- Half of adults **(50%)** own and regularly use at least one citizen-initiated surveillance technology, such as a smart doorbell, journey camera or smart home device.
- Smart doorbells are the most widely used citizen-initiated surveillance technology, with **31%** of adults reporting that they own and regularly use one. This compares with **30%** for smart home or internet of things devices and **18%** for journey cameras.
- Nearly seven in 10 adults **(69%)** believe smart doorbells improve their personal safety and security. Among smart doorbell owners, this rises to **80%**.

- Over half of adults **(58%)** believe journey cameras improve personal safety on the roads.
- Three in five adults **(59%)** believe citizen-initiated surveillance technologies are effective at deterring crime. Among device owners, this rises to around two thirds **(66%)**.
- The public show a strong willingness to share digital evidence with police. More than nine in 10 adults **(91%)** say they would be likely to share footage relating to a burglary inside their home, three quarters **(75%)** would share footage of suspicious activity outside their home, nearly three quarters **(73%)** would share footage of dangerous driving, and just under half **(46%)** would share footage of speeding.

Taken together, the findings suggest that digital citizen evidence is already a mainstream feature of everyday life. Members of the public are generating digital evidence at scale, and they are willing to share it with police, creating significant opportunities for prevention, investigation and public participation in policing.

**Figure 1: Smart doorbells are now the most widely used citizen-initiated surveillance technology (source, YouGov)**



### Headline finding

Nearly one in three adults (31%) now owns and regularly uses a smart doorbell camera, making it the most widely used citizen-initiated surveillance technology covered by the survey.

## A GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE

The report proposes ten principles to guide policy, technology, procurement and operational decision-making. These principles are intended not only to inform current practice, but also to provide a framework for assessing future technologies. The need for such a framework is likely to increase as citizen-initiated surveillance technologies become

increasingly sophisticated. Emerging capabilities, including AI-assisted review, automated triage and facial recognition, may create new opportunities for investigation and safeguarding, but also raise important questions about privacy, proportionality, accountability and public trust.

| Principle                                                   | Key question                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Legitimacy, Participation and Policing by Consent</b>    | Does this strengthen meaningful public participation and trust in policing?                |
| <b>Agency, Reassurance and Empowerment</b>                  | Does it help people feel safer without transferring responsibility for policing onto them? |
| <b>Privacy and Proportionality</b>                          | Is the intrusion justified and proportionate?                                              |
| <b>Accessibility and Inclusion</b>                          | Can everyone participate, regardless of language, disability or digital confidence?        |
| <b>Accountability, Feedback and Procedural Fairness</b>     | Will citizens understand what happened to their evidence and why?                          |
| <b>Evidential Integrity and Quality</b>                     | Could the evidence withstand scrutiny from source to court?                                |
| <b>Triage, Human Oversight and Automation</b>               | Is technology supporting human judgement rather than replacing it?                         |
| <b>Interoperability, Consistency and National Standards</b> | Will people receive a consistent service regardless of force area or technology provider?  |
| <b>Managed Demand and Public Expectations</b>               | Does the system help people submit useful evidence while setting realistic expectations?   |
| <b>Effectiveness and Public Value</b>                       | Does the approach deliver measurable public safety benefits?                               |

## Recommendations

### 1. Establish a national framework for digital citizen evidence

By September 2027, the Home Office, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and College of Policing should publish a national framework for digital citizen evidence establishing common principles, governance arrangements, responsibilities and standards.

### 2. Put public trust, feedback and transparency at the centre of system design

By September 2027, the NPCC and College of Policing should establish national standards for communication, transparency and feedback, ensuring that citizen evidence does not disappear into a 'black hole'.

### 3. Support responsible digital citizenship

By September 2027, the College of Policing, NPCC and Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) should publish guidance on responsible evidence sharing, privacy, proportionality and ethical participation.

### 4. Build accessible, scalable and accountable systems

By September 2027, policing should develop a nationally coordinated, locally delivered model for managing digital citizen evidence, using lessons from Operation Snap and other established initiatives to support consistent triage, case progression and responsible use of automation.

### 5. Establish a long-term evidence and evaluation programme

By September 2027, the Home Office, College of Policing, NPCC, The Police Foundation and academic partners should establish a national programme of research and evaluation to identify effective practice, measure outcomes and assess emerging technologies.

### 6. Embed privacy and ethics in citizen evidence technologies

By September 2028, the Home Office and ICO should work with industry to develop standards for privacy-preserving and responsible design in smart doorbells, dashcams and other citizen evidence technologies.

### 7. Promote responsible use of citizen evidence technologies

By September 2027, the Home Office and police forces should launch a national public information campaign encouraging the responsible adoption of citizen evidence technologies and explaining when their use may be appropriate. The campaign should make clear that individuals have a responsibility too, and those who choose to expose valuable property to foreseeable risks, such as receiving expensive parcel deliveries when no one is home, should consider reasonable security measures like smart doorbells that may deter offending or help identify offenders.

Digital citizen evidence is already reshaping the relationship between the public and policing. The strategic choice is whether policing actively develops the governance, capability and partnerships needed to harness that potential, or continues with a fragmented landscape characterised by inconsistency, unmet expectations and lost opportunities.

**This report argues that the public are willing to participate. The challenge now is for policing to create the systems, standards and safeguards needed to ensure that participation strengthens both public safety and public confidence.**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade we have seen the democratisation of digital technology. Falling prices mean that devices such as smart doorbells, dashcams and home virtual assistants, previously accessible only to the very wealthy, are now within the grasp of ordinary citizens (Franssen and Tosza, 2025). At the same time, growing distrust in policing and public institutions, social fragmentation and heightened concern about crime have led many people to take their personal safety and security increasingly into their own hands.

This has resulted in a proliferation of digital security devices in people's homes, outside their front doors, on the dashboards of their cars, or attached to cycle helmets and handlebars. These devices are designed to record the world around them. As lives are lived increasingly online, other forms of potential digital evidence are proliferating too: WhatsApp messages, data from smartwatches or other wearable devices, smart locks controlling access to homes, and information captured from smart speakers.

In the past, those wishing to gather evidence about an incident, such as a collision they were involved in or their car being vandalised, might have been reliant on eyewitnesses being present at the right moment and willing to report what they had seen to the police. Now, with the push of a button, members of the public can access a detailed digital record of what has happened to them or their property.

While much of this data remains unlooked at on private or cloud servers or is posted in neighbourhood WhatsApp groups and on social media, a growing amount is now being shared with the police.

This digital evidence can be shared in two main ways:

- **Proactively** – a member of the public shares evidence relating to an incident that has happened to them which they feel the police ought to know about.
- **Reactively** – police ask members of the public to submit evidence to them relating to an incident that has happened in their area.

Not only do these devices record the world around them; there is evidence that they can influence it too. Studies suggest that people who know they are being recorded or monitored, and that being caught doing something wrong may lead to punishment, may moderate their behaviour in the same way that people act differently when they know they are being watched by police (Forrester and Ruiz, 2024; Clarke and Eck, 2003).

The proliferation of such technology presents new opportunities for policing. For example, members of the public can better take on the role of capable guardians. The research shows that, especially in the case of roads policing, systematic enforcement of the law can contribute to making communities better places to live and work places to travel – so in sharing footage of dangerous or careless driving, members of the public can help make their communities safer and more pleasant places to live (Roaf et al, 2024). Additionally, former Director of Public Prosecutions Max Hill explained in 2020 how these technologies mean that criminal investigators are no longer reliant solely on eyewitness testimony and door-to-door enquiries. Instead, they have the potential to solve crimes using a growing body of citizen-generated digital material (Milmo, 2020).

But this proliferation also presents challenges for under-resourced police forces battling to meet current pressures – let alone face the tidal wave of new demand unleashed by these technologies. These technologies may lead to new opportunities for investigating crime, but there are new dangers if, for example a victim shares evidence that clearly shows an offence, and yet, because of a lack of resources, nothing is done about it.

Police forces have responded to this challenge in different ways. Some are successfully processing digital citizen evidence, aided in some cases by innovative solutions developed in partnership with private sector companies. Others are not. This fragmented approach has profound implications for public trust and confidence.

The National Policing Digital Strategy 2025–2030 sets out a vision to “ethically and accurately capture and convert every single piece of intelligence and evidence available to policing, into universally re-usable pan-police datasets, to help manage threat, harm and risk across all policing use cases” (Police Digital Service, 2025). The effective exploitation of digital citizen evidence is a significant part of this aspiration. This report argues that digital citizen evidence should be understood as a new category of public participation in policing. Like Neighbourhood Watch, Community Speedwatch and traditional witness reporting, it enables citizens to contribute to public safety. Unlike these earlier models, however, digital citizen evidence produces information that is permanent, scalable and increasingly available in real time. This creates significant opportunities for policing but also raises profound questions about capacity, governance, privacy and trust.

The public are willing and able to share digital evidence, but policing systems, expectations and governance have not caught up. There is a risk of losing this moment, with subsequent harms not only to trust and confidence in the policing, but to public safety more widely. Device owners, who feel they are ignored by police, may use more informal channels to share footage, and some, feeling that

the police do not care, may take the law into their own hands.

This report examines how members of the public are generating and sharing digital evidence, what they expect when they do so, and how policing must evolve in response.

## 1.1 METHODOLOGY AND EVIDENCE BASE

This report draws on a mixed evidence base, including:

- A nationally representative public survey of 1,889 adults, commissioned for this report, from YouGov
- A survey of Operation Snap leads across police forces, which had 23 respondents
- A survey of digital forensics/digital forensics leads across all forces, which had 12 respondents
- Expert interviews with 20 experts, police leaders, academics, technologists and practitioners
- Two focus groups, one with members of the public and one with regular submitters of evidence;
- Two expert and practitioner workshops
- Case studies of emerging practice
- A review of academic, operational and policy literature

Interview and workshop quotations are attributed by role, for example (academic expert), (workshop participant), (senior police staff) or (domestic abuse campaigner).





## 2. WHAT IS DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE?

While there is no universally agreed definition of digital evidence, a broad description is offered by the European Convention on Cybercrime, which includes any “evidence that can be collected in electronic form”. However, as Tang (2025) notes, this definition is overly abstract and could apply to almost any electronic device.

The Council of Europe’s *Guidelines on Electronic Evidence* provide a narrower definition, describing digital evidence as “any evidence derived from data contained in or produced by any device, the functioning of which depends on a software program or data stored on or transmitted over a computer system or network” (Council of Europe, 2019).

Traditionally, digital evidence has entered policing through devices seized during investigations, or through material generated by victims and suspects. Increasingly, however, a new source of evidence is emerging, digital citizen evidence.

In this report, digital citizen evidence is defined as:

**Digital material generated by members of the public through citizen-owned or citizen-initiated technologies and voluntarily shared with police, either proactively or in response to a police request.**

We use the term **citizen-initiated surveillance devices** to refer to the technologies through which such evidence is collected.

### 2.1 COMMON FORMS OF CITIZEN-INITIATED SURVEILLANCE

The increasing affordability of surveillance technologies, applications and systems for private use has enabled actors beyond the state to access many of the tools used to control crime independently of it (The Police Foundation, 2025). While journey cameras have been available for

years, these devices are becoming more affordable and therefore more commonplace (Lallie, 2020).

It is thought that around a third of British motorists now have a dashcam in their car (iCompario, 2024). This figure does not include the proliferation of head cams, helmet cams, handlebar cams, body cams and mobile phones with recording capabilities used by cyclists, pedestrians and other road users.

Police awareness of the crime-fighting capabilities of citizen-initiated surveillance is growing rapidly. Appeals for members of the public to share smart doorbell footage or journey camera footage are becoming increasingly common, meaning members of the public are also becoming increasingly aware of the evidential potential of these devices.<sup>1</sup>

Even devices that do not have cameras and so do not actively record footage can be useful in criminal investigations. Urquhart, Miranda and Podoletz (2022) highlight how the integration of the Internet of Things (IoT) into homes has made them “invisible witnesses”. After a period of time, users may become unaware of, or treat as mundane, the technologies embedded in their homes. Nonetheless, these devices continue to record information that may make them witnesses to crimes. For example, IoT data such as information from the iPhone health app has provided evidence in investigations (Milmo, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the investigation into the murder of Julia James in Kent, where a media appeal by Kent Police for CCTV, dashcam and other video footage assisted investigators in identifying and building the case against Callum Wheeler, who was convicted of her murder in 2022 (BBC, 2022).

## Box 1. Common Citizen-Initiated Surveillance Technologies

### Smart doorbells

A smart doorbell is an internet-connected doorbell that notifies the homeowner on their smartphone when a visitor arrives at the door. It activates when the visitor presses the doorbell, or when motion sensors detect movement. These devices allow people not only to communicate with someone at the door without answering it, but also to record activity close enough to trigger the camera.

### Internet of Things (IoT)

The IoT refers to internet-connected devices such as smartphones and watches, smart televisions, smart speakers, fitness trackers and smart meters. These devices gather data through ambient sensors, such as cameras, microphones and accelerometers, and use that data to make inferences about their environment (Urquhart, Miranda and Podoletz, 2022). The number of connected IoT devices worldwide is expected to increase significantly, from 18.5 billion in 2024, to 39 billion in 2030 (Sinha, 2025).

### Journey cameras

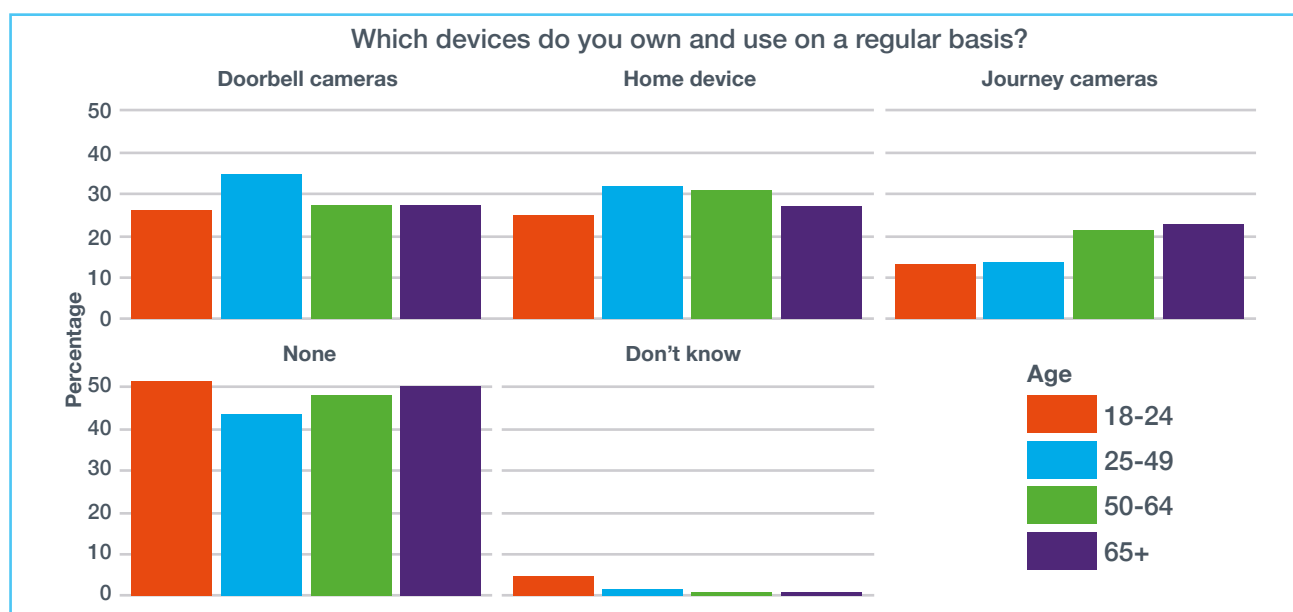
Journey cameras are compact digital recording devices designed to continuously capture video, and sometimes audio, GPS data and sensor inputs, of the road environment. The category includes dashcams, helmet cams, head cams, handlebar cams and body cams, as well as mobile phones with video recording capability. These devices are used by drivers, cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders to capture examples of road user behaviour they consider unacceptable (Wells and Amietta, 2024).

## 2.2 SCALE OF OWNERSHIP AND USE

A representative public survey of 1,889 adults commissioned from YouGov for this report found half of adults (50%) own and regularly use at least one citizen-initiated surveillance technology, such as a smart doorbell, journey camera or smart home device. Smart doorbells were the most popular, with 31% of the sample owning and

using them, while 30% had a smart home or IoT device, and 18% owned a journey camera. Our survey showed those between the ages of 25 and 49 are the most likely to own a citizen-initiated surveillance device, with the most popular devices in that age group being doorbell cameras followed by IoT or home devices. In contrast, older adults are most likely to have a journey camera, with the highest use among those aged 65 or older.

**Figure 1: Percentage of people who own and use a citizen-initiated surveillance device on a regular basis (source, YouGov)**



# 3. WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE SMART DEVICES?

## 3.1 FEAR OF CRIME AND INSECURITY

The promise of citizen-initiated surveillance devices for the public, as Urquhart, Lodge and Crabtree (2019) state, is “greater convenience, security, safety, efficiency and comfort” in everyday life. These devices allow people to see who is at the door, enhance their feelings of safety and security by providing a record of potential crimes happening near their homes, and provide “personal reassurance” after incidents such as collisions or near misses on the roads (Responsible Sensing Lab, n.d.; Wells and Amietta, 2024).

The growth of citizen-initiated surveillance should be seen in the context of a broader social backdrop of fear of crime, perceived insecurity and loss of trust in the police. Fear of crime refers to anxiety and concern about becoming a victim and is increasingly linked to perceptions, rather than realities, of rising crime, fuelled by extensive media coverage and reduced police visibility (Attinger and Moon, 2025; Etopio and Berthelot, 2022). Research shows that fear of crime can damage wellbeing, weaken community cohesion and undermine trust in policing and other institutions (Doran and Burgess, 2012; Singer et al., 2019).

Since the mid-1990s, the Crime Survey of England and Wales has shown long-term decreases in the number of incidents of traditional offline crimes such as theft, criminal damage and violence with or without injury (ONS, 2026). However, data from YouGov examining 11 crime types shows that between 50% and 85% of adults in England and Wales believe these crimes have increased over the last 10 years (YouGov, 2026). A meta-analysis of 66 studies found that fear of crime and victimisation, along with other factors, are negatively associated with satisfaction with police (Bolger, Lytle and Bolger, 2021). In short, people are more likely to hold negative views about police

if they feel unsafe and do not think police are effective in reducing crime.

Moreover, there is evidence of rises in parcel theft as the public increasingly purchase goods from online retail platforms. This may serve as a signal crime, fuelling perceptions that overall crime is rising even when it is not. Research by Quadient (2025) found that 4.83 million homes suffered at least one stolen parcel, representing a 31% rise from the previous year. The same survey suggested that just one in 353 thefts is reported to police, with this underreporting blamed on the fact that eight in 10 people feel police do not take parcel theft seriously enough (Quadient, 2025).

Several expert interviewees for this study described a form of “learned helplessness”, where individuals feel crimes go unaddressed and that they are powerless to intervene (Attinger and Moon, 2025). In such contexts, surveillance technologies offer a means of reasserting agency over personal safety.

The idea of sharing images and footage to help achieve accountability for wrongdoing gained prominence as a citizen response to human rights violations in Syria in 2011 (Hamilton and Okeowo, 2025). What Hamilton (2018) calls “user-generated evidence” has advantages in that it enables evidence to be captured immediately, preserving information that might otherwise be destroyed. Importantly, it “increases access and agency by those experiencing or witnessing wrongdoing in their community” (Hamilton and Okeowo, 2025).

## 3.2 FEELING SAFE

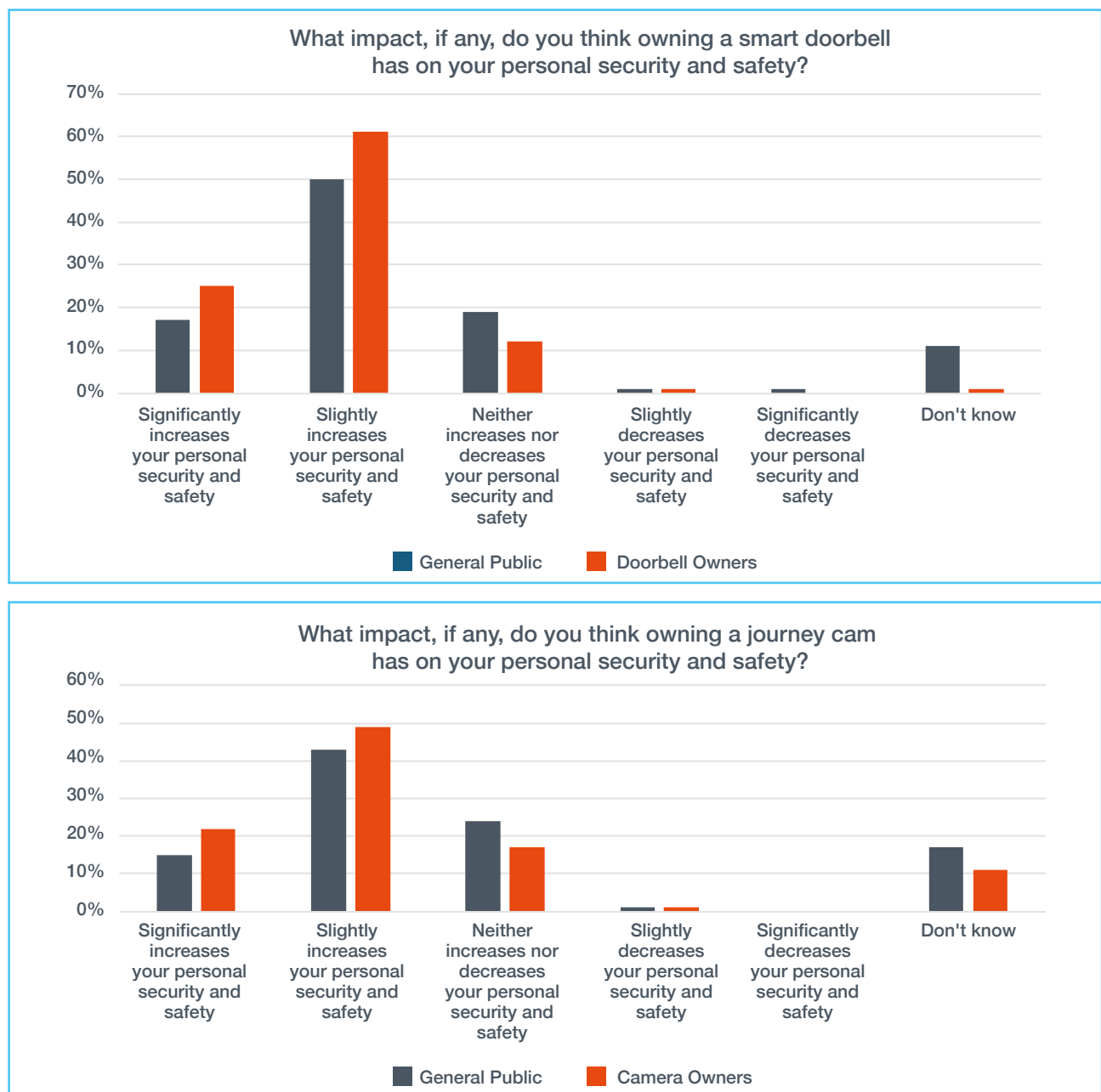
Smart security devices primarily operate by providing reassurance. Survey data commissioned from YouGov for this report shows that approximately 69% of the general public believe smart doorbell cameras improves their sense of personal safety at home, with 17% saying it

significantly improves their personal safety and 52% saying it slightly improves it. This was even higher among smart doorbell owners, with 25% saying it significantly improves their personal safety and 55% saying it slightly improves it.

Similarly, over half (58%) of the general public think journey cameras make them feel safer on the roads, with 15% saying they significantly increase their personal safety and 43% saying they slightly increase it. A quarter (24%) said journey cameras neither made them feel safer nor less safe.

This finding chimes with research carried out in Holland, which found that 62% of smart doorbell users reported feeling safer as a result of having the devices (Ipsos I&O, 2025). Similarly, a public survey of dashcam users by Amietta and Wells (2024) found that the public were generally positive about the merits of journey cameras in terms of increasing safety, especially among people whose motivation for obtaining one was an incident that had threatened their safety.

**Figure 2: Public perception of the impact that owning citizen-initiated surveillance devices has on security and safety (source, YouGov)**



### 3.3 SELF-GUARDIANSHIP AND EVERYDAY REASSURANCE

For many users, the appeal of these devices lies not in preventing crime but in providing everyday reassurance: seeing who is at the door, reviewing near misses on the road, or checking activity while away from home. In contexts such as domestic abuse, stalking or repeat burglary, devices can feel transformative, enabling victims to make informed choices and regain a sense of control.

One interviewee, a Neighbourhood Watch coordinator, described the “revolution” that smart doorbells and other citizen-initiated surveillance devices had brought in making “security accessible for all” and “offering reassurance” to communities on edge:

*“When video doorbells first came in, it was a revolution to communities in terms of the empowerment thing. It helped them look out for their property, for cars, for their belongings, even when they were not there.”*

*(Neighbourhood Watch coordinator)*

Case studies such as Cumbria Neighbourhood Watch’s provision of smart doorbells to domestic abuse victims, see Box 2 below, illustrate how such technologies can enhance both perceived and practical safety when implemented ethically and supportively.

#### Box 2: Smart Doorbells in Cumbria

In 2019, Cumbria Neighbourhood Watch began giving out free smart doorbells to vulnerable domestic abuse victims who no longer lived with their abusers but who were still being harassed and stalked by them. Referrals were made by police officers and staff, and victims were visited to ensure they met the eligibility criteria before a doorbell was installed at no cost.

As well as being given the doorbells, victims were shown how to use them and instructed on appropriate use around data protection, such as never sharing footage on social media. Since the pilot began, more than 100 doorbells have been fitted, and they are also being given

to victims of repeat burglary and persistent antisocial behaviour.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with victims reporting that the devices have improved their safety and security as well as supplying evidence in cases where restraining orders were breached. One victim reported that once the doorbell was installed, and she was able to see who was at the door and make an “informed choice” about opening it or calling police. She said the doorbell “makes me feel safe and provides an element of protection for us”, adding that she had regained confidence since the doorbell was installed and could now sleep without fear. This work has been highlighted as good practice by the Neighbourhood Watch Network.

Of course, there is a difference between feeling safe and being safe. As one academic interviewee suggested:

*“I think there’s a difference between feeling safe and the perception of feeling safe, and I think that it helps for the perception. Research shows people feel safe with a camera, but it’s no more safe to have one.”*

*(Academic expert)*

Moreover, scholars caution that technologies may distort perceptions of threat by making users more aware of everyday activity, potentially fostering anxiety rather than security (Calacci, Shen and Pentland, 2022).

### 3.4 CRIME REDUCTION

The newness of these citizen-owned surveillance technologies means there is limited evidence on their effectiveness at reducing crime (Calacci, Shen and Pentland, 2022). Ring CEO Jamie Siminoff has argued that his devices can almost “zero out crime” within 12 months, and the company claimed that a 2015 Los Angeles Police Department pilot of its devices led to a reduction in burglaries “by as much as 55%” (Pattison Tuohy, 2025; Harris, 2018). However, analysis by researchers at MIT found no evidence to back up

these claims, adding that the sample size was too small to draw any conclusions (Pattison Tuohy, 2025; Harris, 2018).

Similarly, a study in Almere in Holland comparing crime rates in areas with and without smart doorbells found that while burglaries reduced significantly in areas with smart doorbells, the same reduction happened in the control group (Montag et al., 2021).

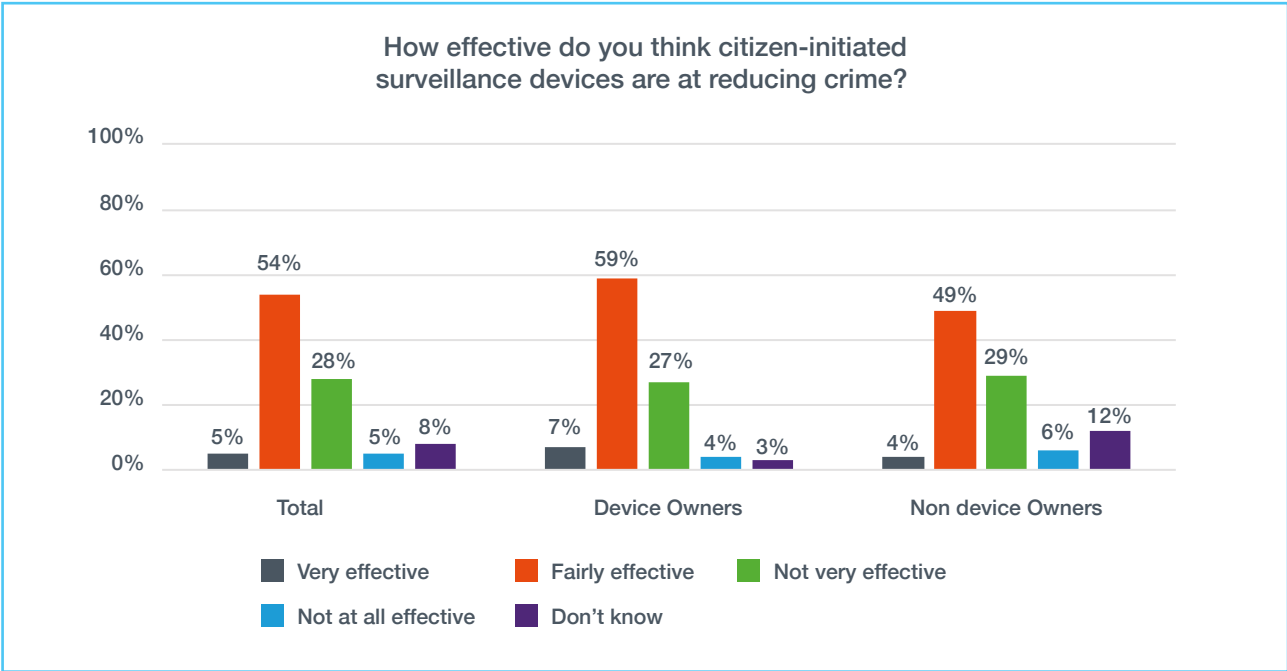
In terms of the effectiveness of journey cameras at reducing crime, the academic literature focuses almost exclusively on their role as evidential artefacts in digital and traffic investigations, and there is no evaluation of dashcams as a crime prevention or deterrence measure.

However, research into speed cameras and CCTV more generally suggests there is some evidence of crime prevention efficacy. Piza (2024) notes that CCTV schemes incorporating active monitoring practices were associated with a significant crime

reduction of approximately 15%. Similarly, early studies of speed cameras found reductions in those killed and seriously injured of 50% at fixed sites and 35% at mobile sites (Gains, 2005). However, since saturation has been reached, there is little evidence of continued declines (Muir and Halkon, 2022). Moreover, CCTV is most effective when it is actively monitored and acted on; passively monitored systems do not appear to generate the same significant effects (Piza, 2024).

Nevertheless, while there may be a lack of evidence on whether citizen-initiated surveillance devices actually reduce crime, there is no doubt that the public strongly believe they do so. Results from our YouGov survey found that 59% of the public thought these devices were effective at deterring crime, compared to 33% who thought they were not. This figure rose to 66% among those who own a device.

**Figure 3: Public perception of the effectiveness of citizen-initiated surveillance devices at reducing crime (source, YouGov)**



There are clues in the research about the origin of this public perception that such devices might reduce crime. Classical deterrence theory proposes that members of the public will not offend if they fear the consequences of their behaviour in terms of the certainty, severity and swiftness of punishment (Abramovaite et al.,

2022). Rational choice theory similarly suggests that deterrence can occur by increasing the risk of being caught, demonstrating capable guardianship and sending an informal message that the risk of detection and apprehension is high (Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Pepper and Bullock, 2024).

It has been shown that being watched influences driver behaviour, especially in the case of the “otherwise compliant citizen”, as one interviewee termed it. These otherwise compliant citizens are likely to be more motivated to align with moral and social expectations and behave in a way they consider right, rather than being deterred solely by the risk of being caught (Bradford et al., 2015). Similarly, while a doorbell camera might not deter a habitual thief who would simply cover their face, it may deter more opportunistic “porch pirates” (Schutz, 2023)

In the case of drivers and riders, evidence shows that detection likelihood is one of the strongest factors in deterring illegal driver behaviour (Florent et al., 2021). With reference to smart doorbells, Mikhaylova et al. (2025) argue that similar mechanisms may be in play, finding that members of the public reported moderating their behaviour when they knew they were being monitored. Citizen-initiated surveillance may therefore work to reduce crime by exercising informal social control: the everyday reactions of individuals and groups that encourage or pressure others to conform to social values and laws (Tompson, Belur and Giorgiou, 2020).

As one interviewee put it:

*“For me, the biggest form of prevention is to create a deterrence. If you empower the public and more of the public know, well, if I commit an offence, it’s very easy for a victim or witness to share that evidence of that offence with the police... then actually you start to create a real deterrence against committing crime.”*

*(Technologist)*

However, for citizen-initiated surveillance to have a deterrent effect, the public have to believe that offending will have a consequence. There must therefore be a mechanism for footage to be shared with police and the police must take swift action where appropriate. After all, the research shows that in terms of deterring criminals from offending, the severity of the punishment has little effect compared to the certainty that they will be caught and caught swiftly (Abramovaite, et al., 2022).



# 4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, POLICING AND THE PEELIAN TRADITION

This chapter argues that rather than being a new phenomenon, the growing role of members of the public in generating and sharing digital citizen evidence reflects a long-standing understanding of policing in England and Wales as a form of collective responsibility, underpinned by public consent, participation and legitimacy.

## 4.1 THE POLICE ARE THE PUBLIC

Before the establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829, the maintenance of order and the pursuit of offenders rested largely with local communities. Policing functions were carried out through parish constables, watchmen and the legally sanctioned practice of the hue and cry, whereby citizens were obliged to raise the alarm and assist in apprehending suspects (Critchley, 1967; Muir, 2025). While these arrangements were often uneven and ineffective, they established an enduring principle: responsibility for safety and order was shared between the state and the public.

The creation of professional police forces did not eliminate this idea of shared responsibility. Rather, efforts were made to ensure that policing did not become too detached from the public it served. The enduring articulation of this principle is found in the idea that the police are the public and the public are the police, with police officers simply members of the public paid to devote their full attention to duties incumbent upon every citizen in the interests of community welfare (The Police Foundation, 2022; Halkon, 2025).

Importantly, the Peelian tradition does not imply that the police and the public perform identical roles. Police possess unique legal powers, including arrest, search and the use of force,

reinforced through statutory frameworks such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (Andrews, 2025). However, as Loader (2000) argues, contemporary security is increasingly produced through a complex assemblage of state agencies, private actors, community organisations and citizens themselves. Similarly, Pepper and Bullock (2026) argue that policing has progressively shifted from models where policing is done to communities towards models where it is done with or even by them. Williams (2016) describes this as part of wider attempts to make government “us” by using citizens as partners in the provision of public safety and public order.

## 4.2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN POLICING

Public participation in policing has long been operationalised through mechanisms that rely on observation, reporting and deterrence rather than enforcement.

Neighbourhood Watch schemes, first established in the 1980s, sought to mobilise “public spirited members of the community who observe what is going on in their neighbourhood and report suspicious activity to the police”, thereby acting as the “eyes and ears” of policing (Laycock and Tilley, 1995). Research suggests these schemes contribute to crime reduction through informal social control, territorial signalling and increased vigilance (Tompson, Belur and Giorgiou, 2020; Pepper and Bullock, 2024). By encouraging active participation in community safety, they can also help restore agency and reduce feelings that crime is rising and residents are powerless to respond (Pepper and Bullock, 2024).

A similar logic underpins Community Speedwatch. Since the early 2000s, volunteers have received

training and approved detection devices and played an active role in encouraging road safety. Registered vehicle keepers are contacted, usually through letters issued by local police services, with the aim of educating them about the risks of speeding. Pepper and Bullock (2026) found that volunteers provide “additionality” by contributing something police alone cannot, given finite resources and the fact that police cannot be everywhere (Muir and Halkon, 2022). At the same time, their research highlights that volunteers frequently want greater support, feedback and engagement from police if they are to feel their contribution makes a meaningful difference (Pepper and Bullock, 2026).

Public participation also extends beyond observation. Research on self-administered interviews demonstrates that witnesses can effectively contribute to evidence gathering through standardised tools allowing them to provide written accounts immediately following an event. Such approaches can increase the amount of information recalled without reducing accuracy and are particularly useful where large numbers of witnesses are present (Gabbert et al., 2009).

## 4.3 DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE AS THE NEXT EVOLUTION

Digital citizen evidence represents a further evolution of this participatory tradition. Technologies such as smart doorbells and journey cameras enable the routine collection of observational data that can subsequently be shared with police when an incident occurs. In this sense, citizen-initiated surveillance extends longstanding practices of witnessing and reporting into a digital context, changing their scale, permanence and evidential significance. Importantly, these technologies do not require citizens to patrol, intervene or enforce the law. Rather, if used ethically and effectively, they enable members of the public to contribute information that may otherwise go undocumented.

In recent years, physical neighbourhood watch has been supplemented by digitally mediated forms

of communal surveillance. WhatsApp groups, Nextdoor communities and similar platforms enable residents to exchange warnings, share footage and communicate with police (Mols et al, 2019; Parker and Dodge, 2024). While these platforms can promote cohesion and feelings of safety, they also raise concerns around ethnic profiling, distrust of outsiders and commercial incentives that may amplify fear and suspicion (Kurwa, 2019; Mols et al, 2019; Anthony, 2022). Moreover, Nextdoor generates revenue through data-driven advertising and partnerships, leading to concerns that, in order to make money, it cultivates, hatred, bigotry, fear and suspicion, the very things it purports to challenge (Anthony, 2022).

Alternative approaches such as Neighbourhood Alerts, known in London as Met Engage, facilitate direct communication between police and the public. The platform enables citizens to receive information from police and increasingly allows them to register smart doorbells, dashcams and CCTV equipment. Since it was launched in London in June 2025, more than 150,000 people have signed up to tell their local policing teams about the issues that matter to them. Officers, in turn, have sent almost 24,000 messages back to the public (Metropolitan Police, 2026). Early evaluations show Neighbourhood Alerts is more trusted than Nextdoor and other rivals, that users generally feel more able to keep themselves safe from crime and has improved their perception of the police (Crest, 2025).

## 4.4 THE POLICE CANNOT COMBAT CRIME ALONE

The importance of public participation becomes even more apparent when viewed against the current policing landscape. In the previous chapter, we referred to the purchase of citizen-initiated surveillance devices as a response to the idea of learned helplessness, the idea that the public felt that they were feeling increasingly unsafe in their communities.

While there is no evidence that crime is increasing increasing, it is true that there has been a withdrawal of the police from the public realm (The

Police Foundation, 2022). As the Police Reform White Paper, *From Local to National* argues, the fall in public confidence in the police is linked to the decline of visible neighbourhood policing. The percentage of people who reported that they never see police or Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) on foot patrol in their local area rose from 25% in 2010/11 to 54% in 2024/25. Just 11% of people reported seeing police on foot patrol in their local area at least once a week in 2024/25 compared with 39% in 2010/11 (Home Office, 2026).

Members of the public in a Police Foundation-convened focus group linked this decline in visibility to concerns about capacity and community presence:

*"I worry that policing isn't felt within the community anymore... I remember being a kid and you would always see blues and twos down your local high street, now you rarely see a Bobby on the beat... I worry resources are stretched almost to breaking point."*

*(Focus group participant)*

Interviewees repeatedly linked declining visibility, growing demand and organisational pressure to the increasing importance of active citizenship. One senior police leader argued:

*"The highest driver for me of citizen evidence is the Peelian principle that the public are the police. The public have developed this learned helplessness, we're used to police doing everything for us. We need to redress the balance."*

*(Senior police leader)*

The need for active citizens has become more pressing in a context of increasing demands on limited police resources (Halkon, 2019). Ross (2013) argues that British people have forgotten their "guardian role as citizens" and that if they do not reclaim it, the "thin blue line will always be stretched to the point where it can barely cope".

Several interviewees suggested that digital citizen evidence provides a way of restoring agency while addressing the reality that police resources are finite. As one participant put it:

*"Police can't be everywhere, but with digital citizen evidence [they] can be anywhere."*

*(Senior police staff)*

This argument emerged particularly strongly in relation to roads policing. Over the past decade, roads policing has experienced significant reductions in capacity (Muir and Halkon, 2022). RAC analysis suggests roads policing officer numbers have fallen by around 22% since 2015, leaving fewer than 4,000 officers responsible for policing more than 41 million vehicles (RAC, 2025).

The reduced visibility of roads policing is directly linked to concerns about dangerous driving. Drivers are more willing to comply with the rules of the road if they feel they are likely to be caught and punished. Conversely, breaking the law without being caught is likely to embolden further offending (Muir and Halkon, 2022).

As one interviewee put it:

*"The research shows that people who have a near miss and get away with it are more likely to drive dangerously and more likely to have a collision later on."*

*(Road safety campaigner)*

For many people, platforms, such as Operation Snap, provide a means of overcoming feelings of helplessness associated with crime and perceived police absence. As one interviewee observed, digital technologies allow police to "be everywhere" without requiring constant physical presence, while enabling citizens to feel their experiences matter and can lead to action.

Interviewees repeatedly referred to a "thirst to share digital evidence" among citizens. Operation Snap provides the clearest example. As several officers explained, the initiative emerged because members of the public had purchased dashcams and helmet cameras and wanted a mechanism for sharing footage of unsafe driving.

One interviewee said:

*"Operation Snap was never about us asking the public to do police work; it was more about us doing what the public are asking us to do."*

*(Senior police staff)*

Amietta and Wells (2024) found that 17% of respondents who always or sometimes use a journey camera had sent footage to police sites, and an additional 10% had uploaded footage to social media sites, which they said suggests significant potential for growth.

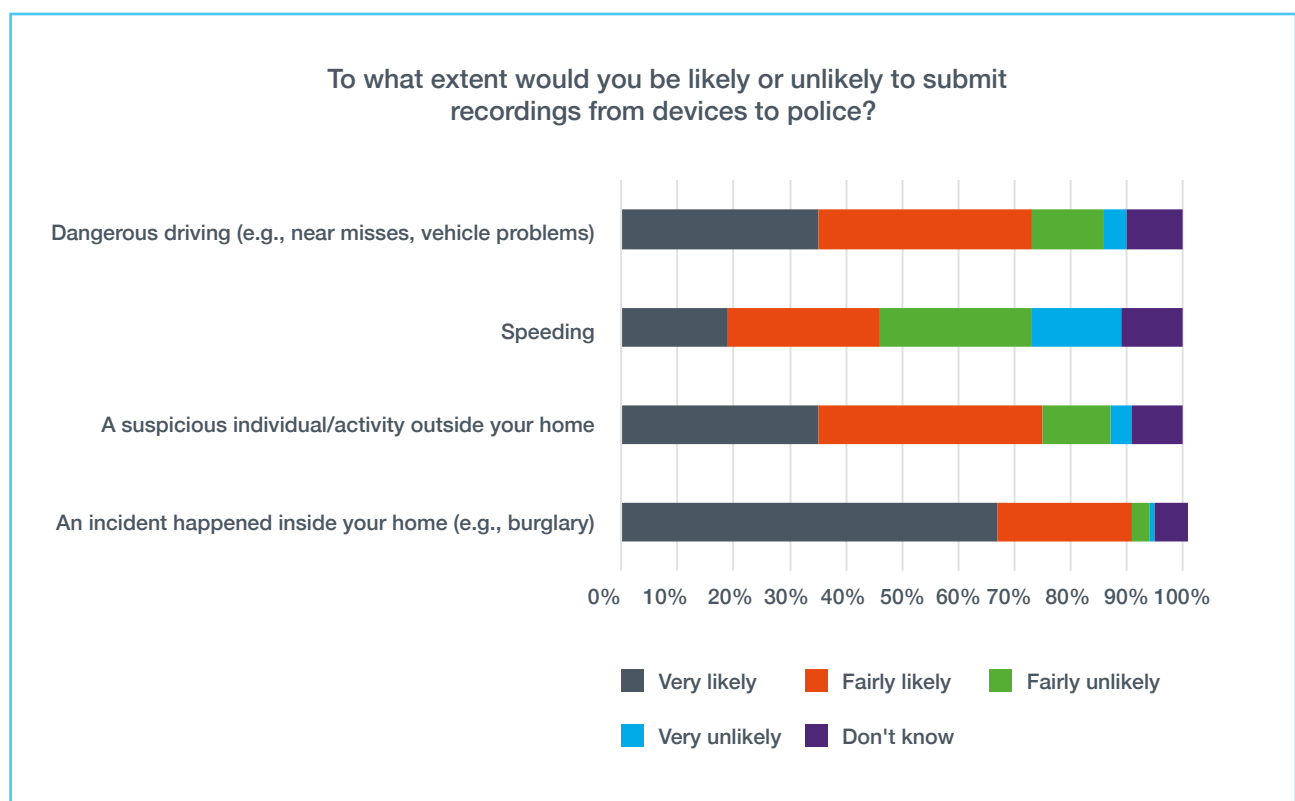
Results from the YouGov poll for this report suggest that members of the public consider themselves likely to share footage from all types of citizen-initiated surveillance devices with police, and that willingness increases with the perceived severity of the crime.

This accords with research carried out by the Dutch Smart Doorbell Consortium (see Box 6), which found broad support for police use of recorded footage in serious incidents. The more serious the crime, the greater the acceptance for giving footage to police.

Members of the public have a range of motivations for sharing digital citizen evidence with the police. Some may have been a victim of crime and want to aid the police in solving it to share it, may feel like a victim even if they are not technically one under law, as in a cyclist undergoing a close pass, while others may have simply witnessed through their devices something they think the police should know about and believe sharing it with the police is the right thing to do.

Kim, Park and Lee (2020) surveyed members of the public in three countries about their motives and concerns behind sharing journey cam footage, and found the majority of respondents were strongly motivated to share footage with the police by reciprocal altruism and social justice ends.

**Figure 4: Likelihood of members of the public sharing footage with police based on incident (source, YouGov)**



# 5. HOW ARE POLICE RESPONDING TO DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE?

As argued in the previous chapter, digital citizen evidence can only strengthen collective responsibility for public safety if members of the public are confident that police will make effective use of the material shared with them. The public may be willing to generate and submit evidence, but that willingness depends on police having the systems, capacity and processes to receive, assess and act on it.

This chapter examines how police forces are attempting to rise to this challenge.

## 5.1 THE CURRENT STATE OF DIGITAL EVIDENCE

The National Police Chiefs' Council estimated that around 90% of crime involves digital evidence, a figure that has only grown in the intervening years (Police Digital Service, 2020). Moreover, the amount of data contained on devices is also increasing: one phone alone can contain one terabyte of data (House of Lords, 2019). The ability to collect, store and analyse such data is therefore now a core requirement of policing.

Muir and Walcott (2021) highlight the benefits that effective use of digital evidence can bring, including reductions in court time and investigation time through more rapid identification of suspects and earlier guilty pleas. However, digital evidence also presents significant challenges for law enforcement. Such evidence may contain “authenticity problems”, since digital material can be compromised, transferred or tampered with, while the rise of deepfakes and AI-generated media is making it harder than ever to distinguish real from fake material (Tang, 2025; Ng et al., 2025).

Yet, while there has been improvement in recent years, police forces still struggle to meet the “overwhelming” scale of digital crime, with too few trained digital forensics investigators able to do the necessary work of turning intelligence into evidence (Ng et al., 2025). In the decade before 2019, the amount of money spent by police forces on forensics almost halved, and although there have been some increases, these are not consistent (House of Lords, 2019). Consequently, there are too few people with the necessary skill set in police forces, contributing to backlogs in which a phone sent for analysis can take several months to download (Lovett et al., 2022).

Moreover, the public are aware of these backlogs. As one interviewee indicated, this may dissuade people from reporting if they feel that nothing will happen and that reporting will not affect the offender's behaviour (Newlove, 2025).

## 5.2 OPERATION SNAP: THE MOST MATURE MODEL

Operation Snap represents the most developed example of the policing response to digital citizen evidence in England and Wales. However, it must be noted, this does not mean examples of best practice are universally, or even widely adopted, across forces. Crucially, as described earlier, it emerged in response to public demand rather than police initiative, with members of the public seeking mechanisms to submit journey camera footage of unsafe or illegal driving behaviour (Wells and Amietta, 2024).

Wells and Amietta (2024) describe how forces initially struggled with this demand, which arrived through police station front counters, CDs, USB sticks, force email accounts and YouTube. North Wales police was the first to seek to impose some

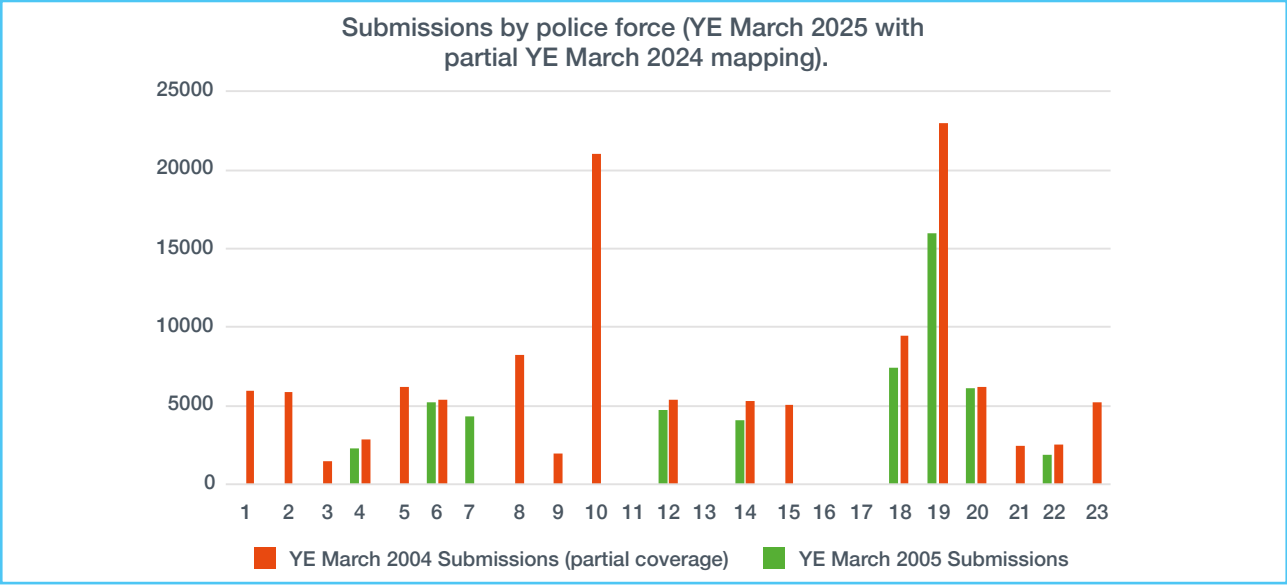
order on this growing area of demand by rethinking how submissions could be made and processed. Police forces have stressed that, as an Avon and Somerset Police Chief Inspector explained, the goal is “not to be targeting drivers unnecessarily – the ultimate goal is making the roads safer for everyone in Avon and Somerset.” (Devereux, 2026).

The offences which fall under the remit of Operation Snap include close passes, near misses, failing to stop at red lights and using a mobile phone behind the wheel. These behaviours are associated with inattentive driving, aggressive driving, speeding or passing too close (Sanders, 2015; Cubbin et al., 2024). Lack of resources meant that these offences are rarely identified by police, much less acted on, so drivers escape without sanctions. Yet evidence shows that repeated exposure to near collisions, without any mechanism to make drivers realise the danger they had narrowly avoided, can lead to them taking increasing risks (Terum and Svartdal, 2019). Operation Snap has the potential to contribute to the social purpose of reducing road crime by enabling the police to identify these precursor crimes. With the help of the public, police are now able to spot and sanction offences they would otherwise miss (Farrell et al., 2024). Official STATS 19 crash data only cover collisions that result in injury and is released annually, meaning that safety measures can only be put in after a serious collision has occurred. In contrast, forces can use Operation Snap data to identify potential collision hotspots in almost real time and so enable police and partners to take preventative action around driver behaviour and the design of roads and roadside environments (Farrell et al, 2024). This in turn enables submitters to see that their actions have made a difference, and thus improve pride-in-place and community cohesion (Local Trust, 2024).

Road users across all forms of transport submit footage to Operation Snap – but drivers of larger vehicles and vulnerable road users are more likely to do so. Amietta and Wells (2024) found 14% of drivers, almost 28% of cyclists, 27% of horse riders and 45.6% of wheelchair or other mobility aid users who use journey cams have submitted to the police at least once.

Although the name Operation Snap is used by more or less all forces, the way it operates differs widely. Some forces are open about their use of citizen evidence in road crime reporting and actively promote the link on their webpage; others do not. This variation is reflected in the volume of submissions received. Of the 23 forces that responded to the force survey for this report, 19 gave submission data relating to the year ending March 2025, and of those only nine gave figures relating to the year ending March 2024. Since the data is partial, no direct comparisons can be drawn. However, it shows wide variation in the number of submissions, from a minimum of 1,464 to a maximum of 22,957 in the year ending March 2025. It also shows volume is increasing: among forces providing comparable data, most experienced growth, with submission volumes increasing by around a quarter year on year.

**Figure 5: Number of submissions received by forces in the years ending March 2025 and March 2024 (source, force survey)**



There were also significant inconsistencies in the way forces organised teams to process submissions. One force reported having a team of eight police constables and one police sergeant, all trained specialist traffic officers, while another had a team of five. However, the average team size was between two and three people.

One force in particular was an outlier (see box below). Rather than running Operation Snap as a “bolt on, with one or two people sat in a cupboard”, and separate from the rest of its operations, this force placed Operation Snap under the main camera enforcement team, which was then responsible for follow-up action, such as notices of intended prosecution being sent out.

**Box 3. Northamptonshire Police Operation Snap**

**Northamptonshire Police: Integrating citizen evidence into mainstream enforcement**

Operation Snap allows members of the public to submit dashcam, helmet camera and other video footage of suspected road traffic offences for police review. While many forces operate citizen evidence schemes, Northamptonshire Police has developed a more integrated approach by embedding Operation Snap within its wider Safer Roads

and camera enforcement functions rather than treating it as a standalone initiative.

The force received almost 2,900 video submissions during 2025/26, representing a substantial increase on the previous year and highlighting growing public engagement with the scheme. During the same period, more than 1,500 Notices of Intended Prosecution were issued following review of submitted footage. Driving without due care and attention, inconsiderate driving and red-light offences were among the most commonly reported behaviours. (Northamptonshire Police, 2026; Northampton Chronicle, 2026).

Unlike models where citizen evidence is managed by small specialist teams, Northamptonshire’s approach integrates citizen-submitted footage into established enforcement processes. The same team responsible for road safety camera enforcement is responsible for reviewing submissions and progressing cases, helping to streamline administration, reduce duplication and ensure evidence moves through a clear route from submission to disposal.

The force reported 21 dangerous driving cases arising from Operation Snap evidence in 2025/26, all of which were progressed for court proceedings. While not without

challenges, the model demonstrates how citizen-generated evidence can become part of routine enforcement activity rather than operating separately from mainstream policing processes (Northamptonshire Police, 2026)

According to a police inspector from Northamptonshire Police, Operation Snap has supported 93 dangerous driving prosecutions since its launch and the force had not lost a dangerous driving prosecution arising from it.

The Northamptonshire experience illustrates the potential benefits of a nationally coordinated and locally delivered approach to digital citizen evidence. It suggests that the effectiveness of citizen evidence schemes may depend as much on organisational design, integration and case management processes as on the technology used to receive reports

“Police cannot be everywhere. Having extra eyes helping us hold drivers to account makes a difference.” (Police inspector)

One interviewee explained that national inconsistencies were due to the fact that, while some forces saw Operation Snap as bringing real benefit, for others it was “one more thing to do on a shrinking budget” (police inspector and national coordinator). Similarly, while some forces had “a massive amount of cloud storage”, others did not and therefore did not encourage submissions (road crime expert).

What was consistent, however, were the reasons forces gave for being unable to process digital citizen evidence as effectively as they wished. Of the 23 forces that responded to the survey, the majority suggested poor quality evidence was the main barrier (as Figure 6 shows). Either the quality of the camera was not sufficient, the journey camera was not positioned to show the offence taking place, the vehicle registration number was not clearly visible, or the incident depicted did not pass the evidential threshold. These incidents tend to receive no further action. Several responses also mentioned the burden created by repeat submitters who send in quantities of poor-quality submissions. The second most common issue was

insufficient resources. As one expert interviewee said:

*“The issue is even big units struggle with volume [of footage sent through Operation Snap] – others have two and a half people in a room. The volume detracts from the implementation of best practice”*

*(Police inspector and national coordinator).*

However, analysis of Operation Snap data suggests that, in some forces at least, poor quality of evidence is not in fact the most common reason for no further action being taken, but rather lack of resources for timely processing of evidence is to blame. Of the 2,017 Operation Snap reports made by the public to West Midlands Police in the year ending April 2025, there was failure to take any action in 65% of cases before the 14-day window police forces have to issue a Notice of Intended Prosecution (Devereux, 2026).

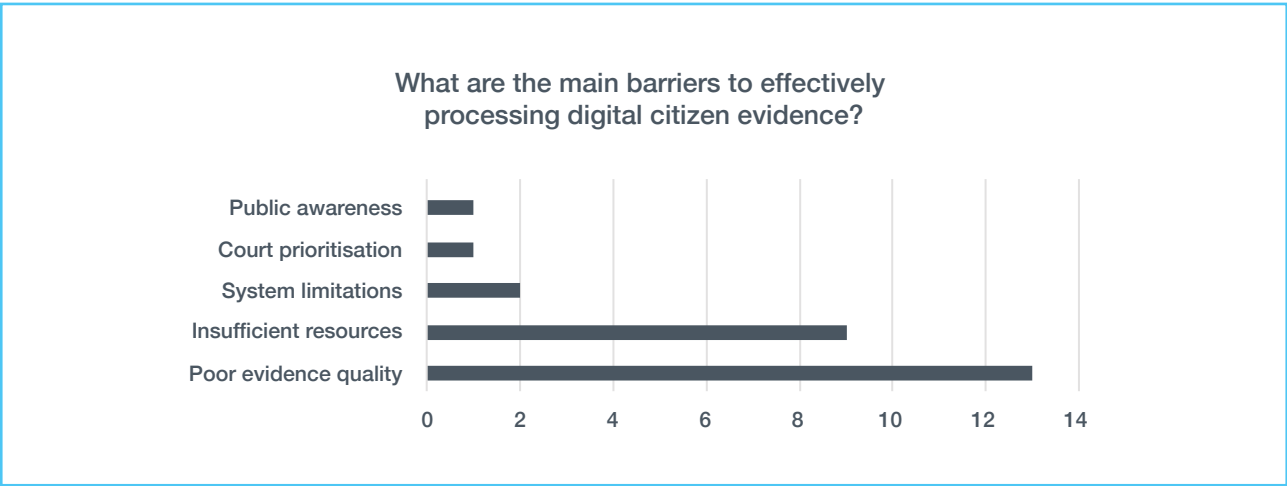
As Figure 7 below shows, much of the processing of evidence is done manually, or with only limited automation, placing a greater burden on police.

We also heard that a shortage of trained level 3 forensic specialists under ISO 17025 means that those viewing submissions are often not forensically trained to judge speed and distance. As a result, in cases where a submitter believes they were passed too quickly but did not take evasive action, the offence may not be provable.

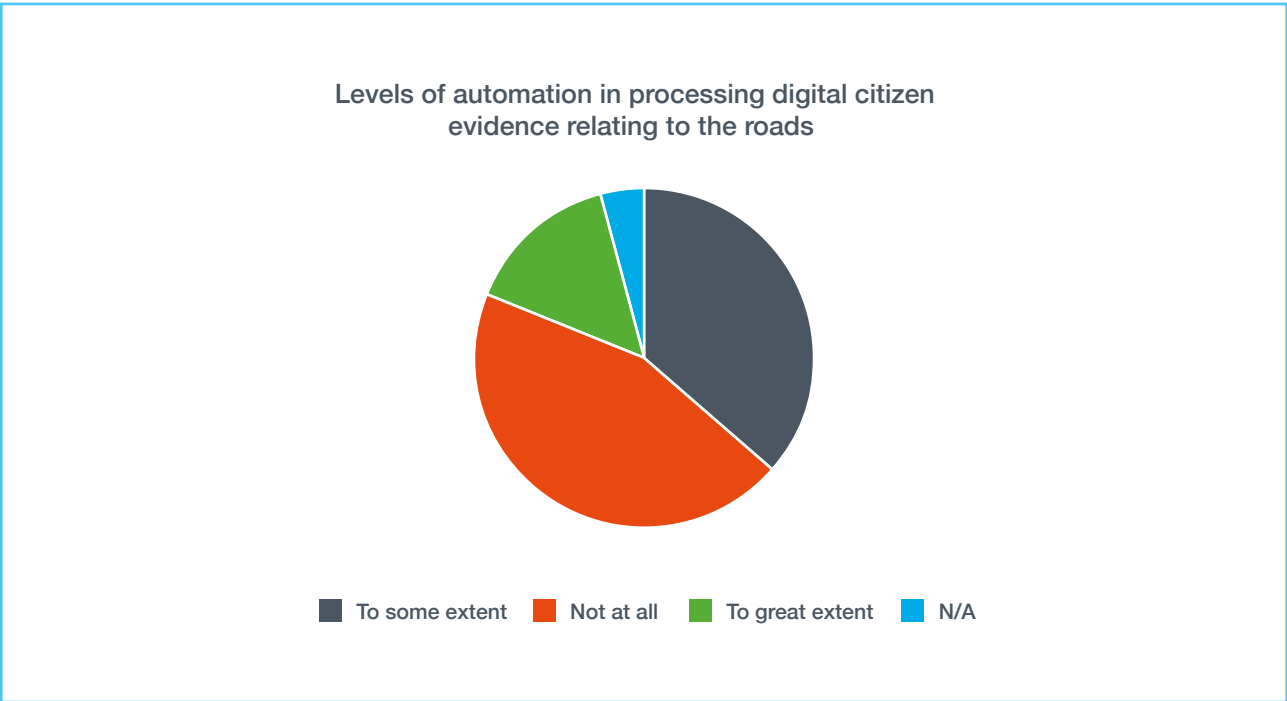
There was also diversity in final outcomes. In some cases, forces went straight to sending out notices of intended prosecution, while others sent warning letters to drivers telling them they would be prosecuted if they drove carelessly again (Greater Manchester Police, 2024; West Mercia Police, 2023). In 2023, Surrey Police issued warning letters in more than 80% of reported incidents (Devereux, 2026).

Savigar-Shaw and Wells (2026) show how a well-designed warning letter can nudge someone into making the right decision with regard to obeying the rules of the road, by giving them motivation to change as well as guidance and incentives. Because warning letters tend not to result in an “official record of consequence” unless breached, they require a lesser burden of proof and are less resource intensive. Although

**Figure 6: Main barriers to processing citizen evidence in Operation Snap (source, force survey)**



**Figure 7: Levels of automation in processing digital citizen evidence relating to the roads (source, force survey)**



evidence remains limited, early findings suggest that generating warning letters on the back of citizen-submitted evidence may be an effective way of preventing further offending (Savigar-Shaw, 2024). Nevertheless, for submitters we interviewed, especially in cases of particularly close near misses which left them feeling scared, warning letters can be seen as “unduly lenient” and make them feel that the police do not take these offences seriously (road safety campaigner).

While Operation Snap provides the strongest current example of the integration of digital citizen evidence integrated into policing practice, the evidence gathered during this research suggests that implementation remains uneven across forces, with considerable variation in capability, resourcing and practice.



# 6. OTHER FORMS OF DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE: AN ORGANIC APPROACH

Beyond roads policing, the handling of digital citizen evidence is significantly less mature and even more fragmented. Historically, forces received digital material via CDs, DVDs and USB sticks, requiring manual handling, physical storage and in-person collection. Over the past decade, many forces have transitioned to digital evidence management systems (DEMS) or digital asset management systems (DAMS), typically cloud-based platforms designed to ingest, store, manage and share digital material securely (College of Policing, 2026). Of respondents to the force survey, 22% still relied on officers carrying out house-to-house enquiries and then asking members of the public to download footage onto a disc or another device.

Systems such as NICE Investigate, Axon Evidence, Egress, Sentry SIS and other local solutions now allow members of the public and businesses to upload digital evidence directly via secure links sent by officers (National Business Crime Centre, 2023). Evaluations suggest these approaches can produce significant efficiency savings. In Kent and Essex, DAMS is estimated to have saved approximately 614,000 hours of officer and staff time since it was implemented in September 2022. Officers are now able to reinvest the time they would have spent collecting and managing digital evidence into other areas of operational policing (College of Policing, 2026).

Similarly, Cheshire Police, see Box 4 below, uses this technology effectively in safeguarding, protecting young people while increasing trust in the police.

## **Box 4. Cheshire Police – OCAIT**

Children are increasingly using phones and tablets to create nude or semi-nude photos and videos of themselves and sharing them online, or with other people via messaging or social media apps. Such a practice is illegal, however, unless there are aggravating factors, police policy is to respond in a way that avoids stigmatising the child or causing them unnecessary concerns (College of Policing, 2016). Previously when a parent or child contacted Cheshire Police saying they had found indecent images of a child stored on their son or daughter's device, the device had to be confiscated in order to secure the image, with a risk it would not be restored. In early 2024 Cheshire Police added the Online Child Abuse Investigation Team (OCAIT) onto its DEMS, NICE. This enables NICE to be used as a temporary, non evidential storage mechanism for imagery, strictly for safeguarding and investigative purposes. After a legal indemnity was agreed, the process went live in January 2025. Under this new process a secure request can be sent to the parent or victim, allowing the images to be uploaded directly to NICE and accessed by OCAIT for assessment and appropriate safeguarding action. This means that the image can be secured without a need for the device to be removed, thus reducing the disruption to the child's life, while reassuring parents that their children would be treated sensitively by police for taking images in "innocence or nativity". The force is now considering evolving this approach to other Protecting Vulnerable People areas.

However, as one interviewee explained, the adoption of digital asset and evidence management systems has developed “organically”, based on local initiatives and local contracts with technology companies rather than national policy or coordination. This means interoperability is challenging, both between forces and within other organisations.

As one workshop participant stated:

*“The standards aren’t there to say, if we procure your system nationally or per force or per region, it’s got to have these endpoints. You’ve got Niche, it won’t talk to Storm, it doesn’t talk to Connect, it won’t talk to all these other systems.”*

*(Workshop participant)*

Another participant said the movement towards force mergers set out in the Police Reform White Paper (2026) made the need for interoperability all the more pressing:

*“Unless we have the standards right now... in four years’ time we’ll be in the same position where nothing connects.”*

*(Workshop participant)*

## 6.1 VOLUME, QUALITY AND RESOURCE PRESSURES BEYOND ROADS POLICING

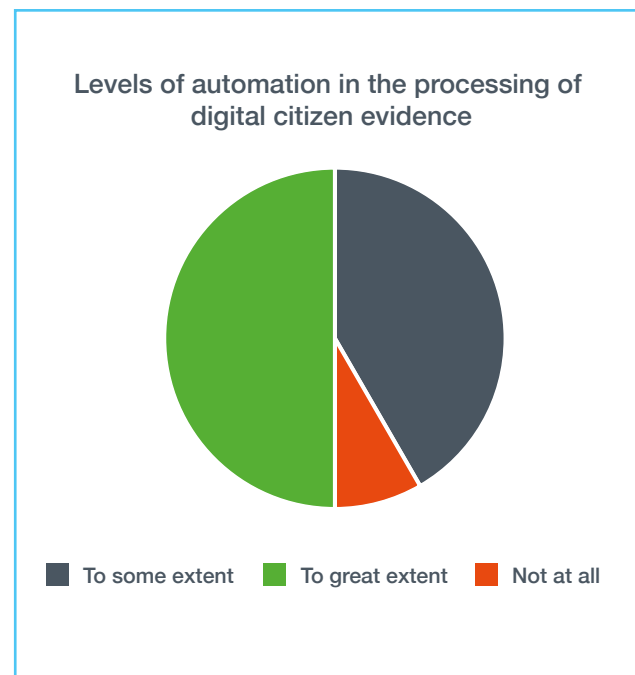
Respondents to the force survey gave highly varied answers to the question of how many third-party submissions they received. Few were able to give more than estimates, not least because some counted individual files, others counted submissions, and others counted submission portals opened. However, one force reported receiving 554 submissions in the year ending March 2023, 30,523 in the year ending March 2024 and 38,653 submissions in the nine months up to December 2025. One partnership of three forces reported 250,000 submissions in 2024 and 300,000 the following March, showing how rapidly demand on storage and officer processing time is rising.

Of the 12 forces surveyed, only one reported having personnel dedicated to processing digital citizen evidence: a team of 11 CCTV officers who processed third-party footage received in relation to ongoing investigations. All other forces said

such footage was viewed by investigating officers in cases where footage had been requested from members of the public.

There is also very little automation, with many forces processing evidence manually or automating to some extent only.

**Figure 8: Automation in the processing of digital citizen evidence for wider policing (source, force survey)**



The scale of demand and the lack of available resources were given as reasons why digital evidence collection tends to be retrospective. As one survey response stated:

*“I believe Single Online Home (SOH) does have the capability to allow media uploads, but we chose to switch it off due to the high number of irrelevant submissions being received and the impact on limited resources.”*

*(Force survey response)*

Where forces did have the capability, the most common approach was to encourage members of the public to register smart doorbells, private CCTV cameras or other devices, and then contact them when an incident occurred so they could upload evidence to a digital evidence management system. Kent and Essex, for example, have a CCTV registry functionality through DAMS, where the public, businesses and councils can register the location of CCTV or Ring doorbell cameras via

police websites. This populates a map in DAMS so officers carrying out investigation enquiries can see whether CCTV may exist in a relevant location. The two forces currently have over 17,000 cameras registered (College of Policing, 2026).

Few police forces have portals through which members of the public can proactively send both a report and evidence if something happens to them. Surrey Police is one of the exceptions. Its “suspicious activity portal”, provided by NICE Investigates, asks members of the public to submit video footage or photographs showing suspicious activity in order to help reduce burglary offences (Surrey Police, 2022).

The force manages expectations through the following disclaimer:

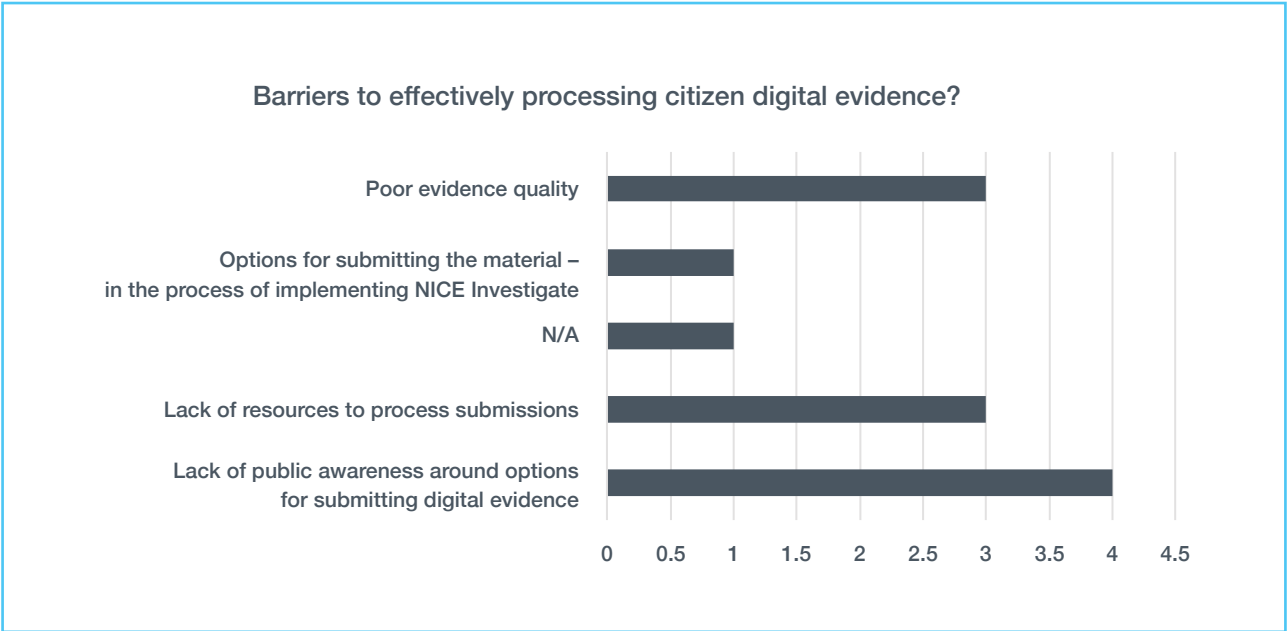
*“We appreciate and review every single submission to the portal. Unfortunately, we are unable to respond to every single submission due to the volume of clips we receive. You may only get a reply if we believe your footage is key evidence in a crime, or to clarify something about it. But please rest assured that these submissions go towards helping protect our communities.”*

*(Surrey Police, 2022)*

Forces recognised that more needed to be done to alert members of the public to the potential of digital citizen evidence. Of the forces surveyed, the majority said that the main barrier to effective processing was still a lack of public awareness around the options for sharing evidence and the benefits it could bring to policing.

To address this, some forces actively push the sharing of digital citizen evidence by promoting their submission platforms. For example, Lancashire Constabulary ran the NICE2Share campaign to promote its “digital evidence management system which allows businesses and members of the public to register their CCTV and other recording devices into a community portal. This system details potential video footage which can be requested for evidence from across the county leading to more efficient prosecutions of offenders and reduced crime in our communities”. The aim of the initiative is to allow “officers [to] request key evidence in a more efficient way.” (Lancashire Constabulary, 2026)

**Figure 9: Barriers to processing digital citizen evidence outside roads policing (source, force survey)**





# 7. A GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE

Digital citizen evidence creates significant opportunities for policing. It can support investigations, improve safeguarding, increase public agency and strengthen public participation. However, it also creates risks relating to privacy, legitimacy, accessibility, evidential quality, feedback, automation, interoperability, private-sector involvement and the shifting of responsibilities onto members of the public. The challenge facing policing is ensuring effective governance that enables police to take advantage of the benefits while mitigating the risks effectively.

The following principles set out a framework for the responsible collection, submission, processing and use of digital citizen evidence.

## **Principle 1: Legitimacy, participation and policing by consent**

**Digital citizen evidence should strengthen collective responsibility for public safety and reinforce the legitimacy upon which policing by consent depends.**

In many respects, digital citizen evidence represents the latest evolution of long-established forms of civic participation, extending the role of the citizen witness into the digital age.

Importantly, many of the developments explored in this report have emerged from public demand rather than police initiative. The growth of Operation Snap, for example, reflects a desire among members of the public to report dangerous driving and to provide evidence of behaviour they believe should attract police attention. Similarly, the increasing popularity of smart doorbells and other citizen-owned technologies suggests that many people wish to play a more active role in protecting themselves, their families and their communities.

However, public willingness to participate cannot be taken for granted. Participation depends upon legitimacy. Research consistently demonstrates that people are more likely to cooperate with legal authorities when they regard them as legitimate, trustworthy and aligned with shared moral values. Jackson et al. (2012) argue that individuals who perceive moral alignment with the police are more likely to engage in cooperative and compliant behaviours. Similarly, procedural justice research suggests that perceptions of fairness and respect are often more important for public confidence than outcomes alone (Tyler, 2006; Myhill and Bradford, 2012).

From this perspective, every decision by a member of the public to submit footage, report an incident or share information represents an act of cooperation. In doing so, citizens place trust in policing institutions and demonstrate a willingness to participate in collective efforts to maintain public safety. The continued success of digital citizen evidence therefore depends upon maintaining the legitimacy on which such cooperation rests.

This challenge is particularly significant in a context of declining public confidence in policing more generally. Evidence suggests that trust and confidence in policing have deteriorated over time, with fewer than half of respondents reporting that their local police do a good job, compared with 62% a decade earlier (ONS, 2025). Satisfaction among victims has also declined. In 2023/24, 55% of victims reported being fairly or very satisfied with how the police handled their case, representing the lowest level recorded for two decades and a 20-percentage point reduction compared with 2013/14 (College of Policing, 2025).

Against this backdrop, digital citizen evidence presents both an opportunity and a risk. On the one hand, it has the potential to strengthen relationships between police and the public by creating new opportunities for participation and collaboration. On the other hand, participation can generate expectations. Citizens who submit evidence often do so because they believe it will make a difference. Where those expectations are unmet, participation may become a source of frustration rather than confidence.

Several interviewees raised concerns about this possibility. One academic expert questioned whether citizen-owned surveillance technologies could ultimately become counter-productive if police lacked the capacity to act upon the evidence generated:

*"People ultimately put up a doorbell like this because they either want to, well, prevent somebody burgling into their home, or if they have been burgled so that the burglar gets caught. Police capacity, at least with us, is so limited that many of these cases are dropped anyhow. Even if you catch the culprit on camera, there's loads of stories where people say, well, we even have the footage or we have a photo. But the police are not doing anything. So, I'm also wondering from the police's perspective whether this also can't at some point be counter-productive."*

*(Academic expert)*

A similar concern emerged in discussions of smart doorbell registration schemes. One workshop participant reflected on efforts to encourage public registration of doorbell cameras:

*"What we worry about then is [members of the public saying], so what? I've registered, but no one's asking me for footage."*

*(Workshop participant)*

This observation captures an important legitimacy paradox. The more policing encourages public participation, the greater the expectation that citizen contributions will be considered, valued and acted upon where appropriate. Participation alone does not produce legitimacy. Rather, legitimacy depends upon citizens believing their contribution has meaning and purpose.

The consequences extend beyond individual experiences. Research suggests that encounters

between police and members of the public frequently have effects that "ripple out" through wider social networks. Rosenbaum et al. (2005) describe how experiences of policing are often shared second-hand through family, friends and local communities, creating vicarious perceptions of legitimacy. Higgins and Halkon (2023) argue that social media now amplifies these effects further, enabling both positive and negative experiences to circulate rapidly and widely.

Evidence gathered during this research suggests that experiences of submitting digital evidence can influence how people feel about policing more broadly. Members of a focus group comprised of regular evidence submitters reported that their experiences affected their perceptions of the police generally. A neighbourhood watch coordinator explained:

*"One time a person or community feels let down, police then have to start again building trust and confidence... trust gets knocked, they tell friends and relatives, then they are less likely to tell people to report." (Neighbourhood watch coordinator)*

Digital citizen evidence therefore carries significance beyond the evidential value of the material submitted. Every submission represents an opportunity either to strengthen or weaken public confidence. Effective use of citizen-generated evidence can reinforce perceptions that policing remains responsive, legitimate and connected to communities. Conversely, where participation appears futile, ignored or disconnected from outcomes, digital citizen evidence risks becoming another source of dissatisfaction and declining confidence.

Members of the public may still continue to submit because they feel a moral obligation. One of our interviewees, a local cycle campaigner, said that many of the people she spoke to who regularly submitted evidence often heard nothing back, yet "they still submit" (local cycle campaigner).

However, there is a risk that those who are dissatisfied with the response they receive from the police, or indeed the lack of a response at all, may instead seek to bypass the police entirely. Digital vigilantism occurs when frustrated members of the public respond to perceived gaps in the criminal justice system by seeking justice through

more informal mechanisms, such as sharing images of individuals they regard as suspicious on social media in order to aid identification (Whitmer, 2025).

Amietta and Wells (2024) found that the more vulnerable the road user, the more likely they were to believe that sharing footage of near misses or close passes on social media was a more effective way of raising awareness of dangerous behaviour than submitting it to the police. Among car drivers who use journey cameras, only around 14-15% believed social media was more effective than reporting to the police. However, the proportion exceeded 25% among cyclists. Half of horse riders believed uploading footage was a better way of attracting police attention, while 45% of wheelchair and mobility-aid users believed it was a more effective way of raising awareness.

This suggests that confidence in formal policing responses may influence whether citizens choose to channel evidence through legitimate criminal justice processes or through more informal forms of online accountability. The more vulnerable the road user, the more likely they appear to believe they will not receive an adequate response from the police and, consequently, the more likely they are to seek alternative routes to recognition, accountability or justice.

Some interviewees suggested that some people sharing footage by formal or informal ways could take advantage of the system, either by posting low-quality footage repeatedly or else staging encounters with drivers and then seeking to monetise footage through posting on YouTube and similar platforms. In particular they described extremely high-volume submitters, such as Cycling Mikey who claims to have reported almost 2,500 drivers since 2019, and has attracted notoriety by posting some of his more dramatic videos of confrontations with drivers on social media (Craig, 2026).

However, those who attended a focus group for regular submitters emphasised that the vast majority are simply motivated by concerns about road danger and harm prevention. They noted that many cyclists also drive, and that their focus

is typically on behaviours associated with serious risk, particularly close passes, because of the potential danger to life and physical wellbeing and because perceptions of danger can deter cycling and undermine active travel.

Participants also reported receiving abuse from some motorists who perceived them as being motivated by a desire to punish fellow road users, or else felt their motivations were misinterpreted by decision-makers as a personal crusade rather than a form of civic participation motivated by public safety concerns (Wells and Amietta, 2024).

Campaigners argued that such perceptions may stem from a lack of understanding of the experience of vulnerable road users. Many decision-makers may never have experienced a close pass themselves and may therefore underestimate the fear associated with such incidents. They recommended cycle training for officers to improve their understanding of potential danger (Wells and Amietta, 2024).

As one campaigner explained:

*"It can be bloody scary. Because even if you've got a bike with reflective gear on and all of that, they go past you and it's scary. They go past you so fast that even if they give you a wide berth, it scares you. But unless you're a cyclist, you wouldn't know that would you?" (Local road safety campaigner)*

The campaigner argued that footage alone often fails to convey the physical and emotional experience of vulnerability on the roads and suggested that police should work more closely with cyclists and other vulnerable road users to understand how road danger is experienced in practice.

The legitimacy of digital citizen evidence ultimately rests on reciprocity. Citizens contribute information, observations and evidence as part of a shared commitment to public safety. In return, policing must demonstrate that public participation is valued, meaningful and directed towards legitimate public purposes. Digital citizen evidence should therefore be understood not merely as a source of information, but as a modern expression of policing by consent and collective responsibility.

## What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Recognise digital citizen evidence as a contemporary expression of policing by consent.
2. Encourage constructive public participation in prevention, investigation and public safety.
3. Treat every submission as an act of public cooperation and trust.
4. Ensure systems and processes support rather than undermine police legitimacy.
5. Demonstrate that citizen contributions are received, considered and used appropriately.
6. Recognise that public participation creates expectations that must be managed responsibly.
7. Consider the wider impacts of citizen experiences on trust, confidence and willingness to cooperate.
8. View digital citizen evidence as part of a broader relationship between police and communities, rather than simply a source of data.

### Test question

**Does this approach strengthen the relationship between police and the public by supporting meaningful participation in policing, or does it risk undermining legitimacy, trust and confidence?**

## Principle 2: Agency, reassurance and empowerment

**Digital citizen evidence should enhance people's sense of agency and safety without transferring responsibility for policing onto them.**

Many people adopt citizen-initiated surveillance technologies because they seek reassurance, control and a greater sense of personal safety. Smart doorbells allow people to see who is at the door, monitor activity around their homes and maintain a sense of connection to their property while they are away. Journey cameras allow road users to review incidents, preserve a record of events and provide evidence where dangerous or harmful behaviour occurs. In each

case, the technology provides a form of everyday reassurance and self-guardianship.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the growth of these technologies should be understood against a broader backdrop of fear of crime, perceived insecurity, reduced police visibility and declining confidence in public institutions. For many people, citizen-owned technologies offer a means of regaining a sense of control in circumstances where they may otherwise feel vulnerable or unsupported. The ability to capture an incident, preserve a record and, if necessary, share that material with police can provide reassurance that wrongdoing will not simply disappear undocumented.

This sense of agency is one of the most significant public benefits of digital citizen evidence. The knowledge that evidence can be captured and retained may help individuals feel more confident, more protected and better able to respond to incidents that affect them. As one interviewee explained in relation to vulnerable victims:

*"[Citizen-initiated surveillance] is a help to police, it protects people in a way police can't. They can't be there 24 hours a day keeping watch over someone's house when an occupant is vulnerable. But doorbell footage allows police to concentrate on other issues in the knowledge that any problems that might arise will be captured on a video doorbell." (Neighbourhood watch coordinator)*

However, such technology should remain an aid for police investigation and not a substitute or a prerequisite for it. Throughout this research, participants expressed concern that citizens are increasingly being expected to gather, organise and present evidence in ways that fit policing systems. Several interviewees described a growing expectation that victims and witnesses should provide screenshots, download footage, identify relevant material and package evidence before police are willing or able to take action.

One academic interviewee described this shift as a process of "responsibilisation":

*"The police are responsibilising the public... [incidents] used to be investigated without digital footage but this is changing. The public are almost having to produce a policeable moment, having to convince the police they have something worth investigating, put a package together and use the right words...which discriminates against those who don't have the language or are traumatised."*

*(Academic)*

In other words, the presence of digital citizen evidence and whether or not the submitter presents it in the 'right' way might be the difference between an incident being investigated and being closed with no further action. Such concerns raise important questions about the relationship between empowerment and burden-shifting. Digital citizen evidence can empower individuals by allowing them greater control over how evidence is captured and shared. Yet empowerment becomes problematic when citizens feel responsible for undertaking tasks that properly belong to police investigators.

This distinction is particularly important for victims of crime, particularly if they are vulnerable. In some circumstances, victim-held evidence can increase autonomy and choice. The Kulpa Police Platform described in Box 8, demonstrates how victims can share material directly with police while retaining greater control over the process. Rather than surrendering an entire device, victims can choose which material they wish to submit, reducing intrusion and preserving privacy.

However, evidence collection may also create new risks and burdens. Victims may be asked to search through messages, review recordings or identify relevant incidents at a time when they are already distressed, fearful or traumatised. For victims of domestic abuse, in particular, gathering and preserving evidence may expose them to additional danger. As one domestic abuse campaigner warned:

*"Gathering evidence is a risky situation for victims, don't suggest an app if they are not safe or if they have a compromised phone."*

*(Domestic abuse campaigner)*

The same interviewee also highlighted the emotional demands that evidence gathering may place on victims:

*"There are concerns about the impact of asking survivors to look through evidence... risking retriggering and retraumatising them."*

*(Domestic abuse campaigner)*

Digital systems may also privilege those who are confident, articulate and able to navigate evidential processes, while disadvantaging people who need support to explain what has happened to them. Citizens should not have to understand evidential thresholds, investigative processes or specialist terminology before their experiences are taken seriously. Nor should justice depend upon an individual's ability to retrieve footage, package evidence or communicate in ways that align with organisational systems.

Those who had experience of submitting footage, particularly under Operation Snap, described processes as difficult to navigate and time-consuming. For example, some forms don't remember submitters' details meaning that people who regularly submit may have to repeatedly enter them. Thus, members of the public risk feeling that they are being taken advantage of. As one interviewee put it:

*"The police don't realise that when you're submitting, it takes time to submit. They're trying [the people submitting] to do it to make it [society] safer."*

The legitimacy of digital citizen evidence depends on maintaining a clear boundary between supporting citizens to participate and expecting them to undertake policing functions themselves. The public can help police, but they should not be expected to investigate their own victimisation or compensate for limitations in policing capacity.

Digital citizen evidence should strengthen people's ability to protect themselves, document their experiences and contribute to public safety. It should empower citizens to co-produce their own safety without transferring responsibility for policing onto them (Amietta and Wells, 2024).

## What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Recognise that many citizens use these technologies for reassurance, agency and personal safety rather than investigation.
2. Support citizens to contribute evidence without expecting them to undertake investigative functions.
3. Make clear that providing evidence is voluntary participation in policing, not a substitute for police action.
4. Avoid placing disproportionate evidential burdens on victims, witnesses or vulnerable people.
5. Ensure reporting systems are supportive, realistic and trauma-informed.
6. Give victims appropriate control over how evidence is shared where this can be achieved safely.
7. Design processes that do not require specialist knowledge, investigative skills or evidential expertise.
8. Ensure that empowerment does not become responsibilisation.

## Test question

**Does this process help people feel safer, more empowered and better able to participate in policing, or does it shift responsibility for investigation and evidence gathering onto them?**

## Principle 3: Privacy and proportionality

**Digital citizen evidence should be collected, requested, shared and used in ways that are lawful, necessary and proportionate.**

Digital citizen evidence can support investigations, safeguarding and prevention, but irresponsible use can have significant negative impacts on individual privacy and wellbeing. Nippert-Eng (2010) defines privacy as the extent to which an “individual has the ability to decide whether or not someone else needs to know or access something and to have her or his wishes followed”.

A significant strand of the literature argues that while citizen-initiated surveillance devices, promise “safety” and enhanced autonomy, they in fact deliver the opposite. For example, Kelly (2022) describes such devices as “consumer-initiated surveillance” and places them within “surveillance capitalism”, where private companies gather personal data and use it to influence, control and monitor consumer choices (Pridemore, 2012). Kelly raises important concerns these devices may not deliver on the promise of enhancing agency, but may instead contribute to data commodification, the undermining of privacy, and, through encouraging “neighbour to neighbour monitoring”, the erosion of communities. Similarly, Kurwa (2019) argues that such technologies can enable white communities to “digitally gate” themselves, acting as a private police force that criminalises Black people and other minorities who enter their space. It is important to note, however, that much of this available research comes from a US context – one in which civilian policing is often framed as a mechanism for maintaining white supremacy through casting non-white people as suspicious and therefore criminal, initially through community-organised slave patrols and later through neighbourhood watch groups which gained popularity in the 1960s (Brucato, 2020; Law and Schenwar, 2020).

While the UK context differs in important respects, there are nevertheless criticisms of citizen-initiated surveillance – particularly around privacy and the danger of citizens taking the law into their own hands – that do resonate internationally. Irresponsible use of digital citizen evidence can have significant negative impacts on individual privacy and wellbeing. The ease with which footage from smart doorbells or journey cams can be shared via social media and neighbourhood platforms risks vigilantism, informal justice and public shaming, particularly where individuals or vehicles are readily identifiable (Parker and Dodge, 2024; Purshouse, 2023). Information circulated publicly may lose evidential value, as sharing on social media strips videos, images and messages of the metadata which assures their authenticity while simultaneously breaching privacy and data

protection principles (Soni, 2025). Moreover, such devices can also be used for oppression and control, such as in neighbour disputes or in cases of domestic abuse (Mikhaylova, 2025).

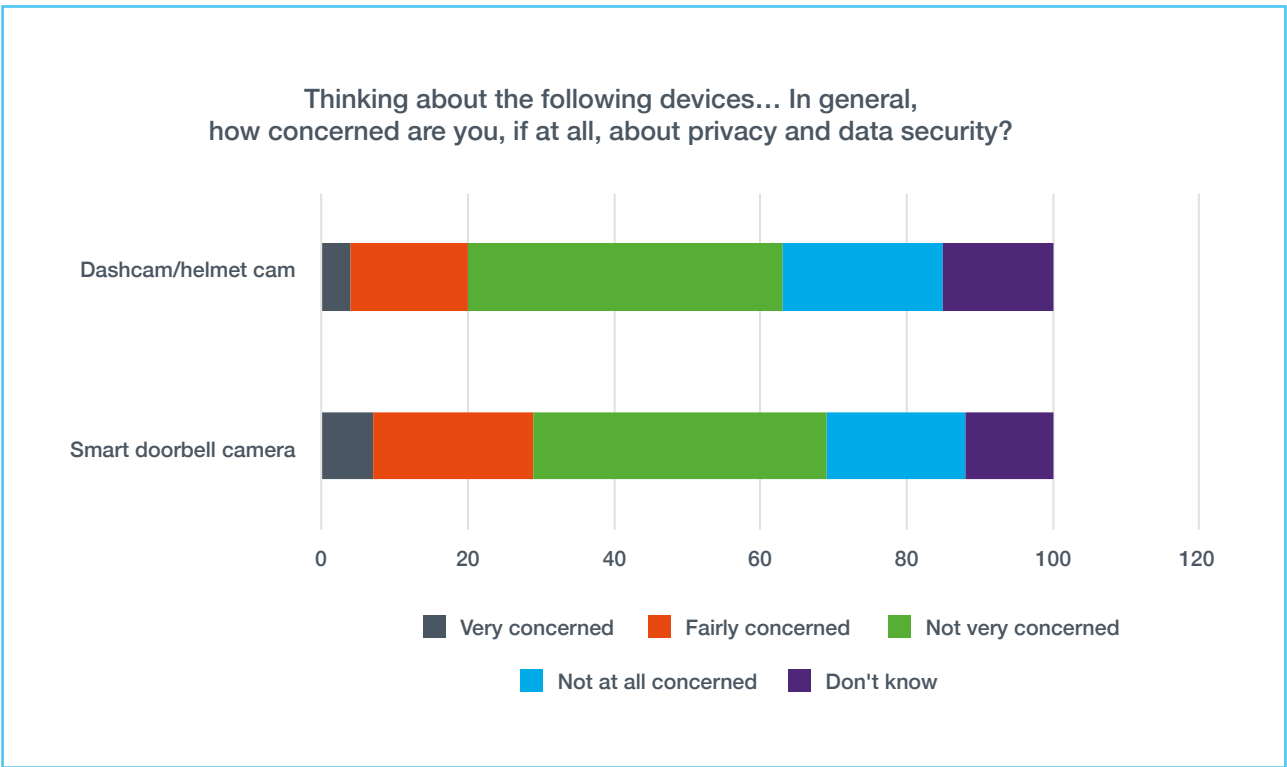
Citizen-initiated surveillance occupies an unusual legal and governance space. Police use of surveillance technologies is subject to legal and procedural oversight, including Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, but equivalent safeguards do not apply in the same way to members of the public who record, retain or share footage. Purshouse (2023) argues that this creates a governance gap because civilians may effectively circumvent procedural protections designed to moderate state power and protect the rights of those subject to criminal investigation.

In some cases, members of the public may also be in breach of the law without realising it, and police requests for footage can interact uncomfortably with these legal risks. In *Fairhurst v Woodard*, the Oxford County Court held that the defendant's use of multiple smart doorbells and other security devices around his property breached data protection and harassment legislation. In particular, the judge held that the audio collected by all three

Ring devices was unlawful, taking into account the long range at which these devices pick up sound.

Analysis of the privacy policies of a range of smart home devices by Liu et al (2025) found that companies generally acknowledge the issue of recording and sharing the personal data of bystanders but frame it in “obscure disclaimers” that attempt to shift legal and ethical responsibility entirely to the device owner, without offering them proactive warnings, guidance, or practical mechanisms to help owners/users recognise and address these obligations regarding bystanders. As a result, bystander privacy is mostly neglected, and affected individuals are likely to remain unaware and vulnerable. Mikhaylova (2025) similarly finds that “the burden of managing moral and legal risks falls disproportionately on individuals, many of whom may lack the resources or knowledge to assess these complexities”. In other words, very few members of the public are aware of the privacy implications of the technology, or else they prioritise their own safety over requirements to comply with privacy laws. This was confirmed by our public survey results, as Figure 10 shows.

**Figure 10: Public concern around the privacy implications of digital citizen evidence (source, YouGov)**



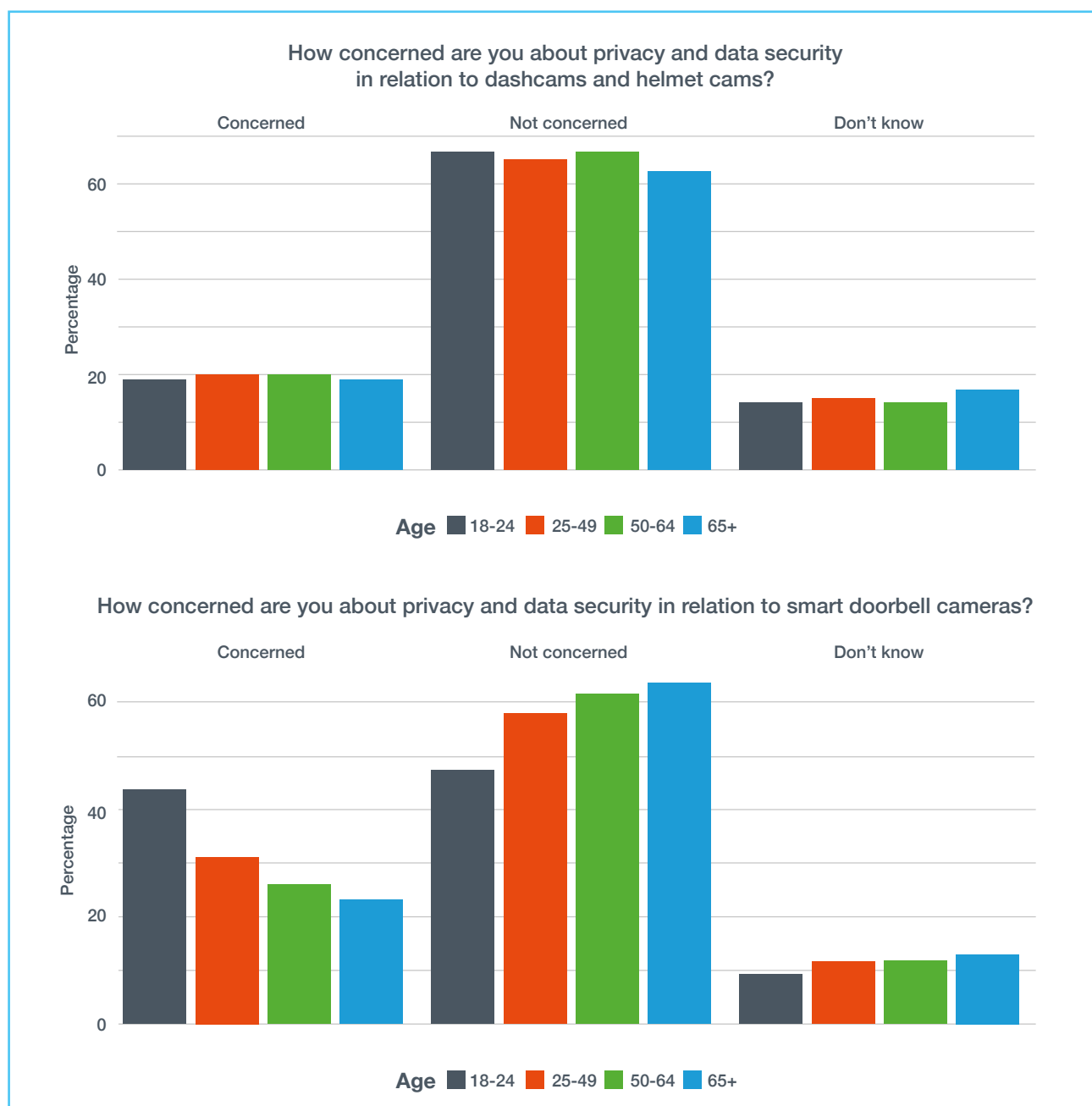
Findings show a general lack of concern about privacy, with most people reporting that they were “not very concerned” or “not at all concerned”. Concern was lower for dashcams than for smart doorbells, which reflects the fact that dashcams are likely to create a more fleeting record of a person’s face than a doorbell.

This contrasts with Amietta and Wells (2024), who found that almost a third (34.8%) of respondents either strongly agreed or tended to agree that using a journey cam would “make [them] feel like [they are] spying on other road users”, and almost a quarter either strongly agreed or tended

to agree that journey cams are “an invasion of other people’s privacy”. This suggests that journey cams and citizen-initiated surveillance may have become further normalised since that work, or that perceptions vary across samples and contexts. As one speaker from our public focus group said with reference to smart doorbells: “It’s just how it is. You can’t worry about it too much. Unless you live under a rock. It’s just part of everyday life.”

However, although members of the public were generally not concerned about privacy, for smart doorbell cameras at least, our survey data revealed nuances due to age, as Figure 11 shows.

**Figure 11: How concerned are you by the privacy implications of citizen surveillance by age and device owned (source, YouGov)**



Awareness of privacy implications may vary across demographic groups. Younger individuals tend to display greater awareness of digital privacy risks and data practices than older adults (Youn, 2005). Similarly, research on smart doorbells found that adults aged 18 to 39 were more supportive of privacy-enhancing modifications to smart devices, suggesting greater sensitivity to privacy concerns among younger users (Ipsos I&O, 2025).

Fixed, outward-facing devices such as smart doorbells raise particular issues because they may capture neighbours, visitors, delivery drivers and public space. Research shows that owners of such devices have “considerable power” over those being recorded, deciding whether to record, what to record and what to do with footage once recorded (Calacci, Shen and Pentland, 2022). There is therefore a risk that members of the public

**Box 5: GDPR and citizen-initiated surveillance**

The General Data Protection Regulation, called UK GDPR in the UK, controls how personal data about identifiable people is collected, used, stored and shared.

In simple terms, if someone records or uses information about people, such as their image, voice or movements, they must:

- Have a good reason for doing so
- Only collect what they need
- Tell people what is happening, where practical
- Keep the data secure
- Delete it when it is no longer needed
- Respect people’s rights, such as access to data about them

Purely personal devices, or those filming for purely personal or household activities, are exempt, but this exemption is narrow and often does not apply once devices consistently record public space or other people’s property.

Dashcams are usually tolerated as incidental, mobile recording when used privately and quietly. Smart doorbells behave more like fixed surveillance, so GDPR is more likely to apply, especially where neighbours or public space are involved.

| Topic                     | Dashcams                                                                             | Smart doorbells                                                                |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Where used                | Inside vehicles, recording roads                                                     | Fixed to homes, recording entrances                                            |
| Recording style           | Mobile, usually short clips                                                          | Fixed, often continuous or motion-based                                        |
| Domestic household use    | Usually applies for private driving                                                  | Often does not apply if street or neighbours are captured                      |
| When GDPR applies         | Business use, monitoring or public sharing                                           | As soon as recording goes beyond your boundary                                 |
| Main personal data        | Faces, number plates, location/time                                                  | Faces, behaviour patterns, deliveries                                          |
| Audio recording           | High risk, strongly discouraged                                                      | High risk, strongly discouraged                                                |
| Likelihood of GDPR duties | Low for private use; high for business use                                           | Medium to high, even for homeowners                                            |
| Sharing footage           | Sharing with police or insurers normally acceptable; public posting can trigger GDPR | Sharing with police possible; public or neighbour-focused sharing is high risk |

fall foul of data protection law without realising it, and that police use evidence obtained or processed in ways that create legal and legitimacy vulnerabilities (Responsible Sensing Lab, n.d; Mikhaylova, 2025).

### **Box 6: Smart doorbells in the Netherlands**

Smart doorbells are increasingly popular in the Netherlands. Data from 2023 suggests that around 1.2 million Dutch homes now have a doorbell with a camera, amounting to around one in seven households (Ipsos I&O, 2025).

Dutch police have created a national registration system, Camera in Beeld, through which homeowners and businesses can register their cameras. Through the system, police can identify which security cameras are available per street, who owns them and how long footage is stored. In cases where police suspect camera footage could add value to an investigation, they may request footage. Those who register are given guidance on how to position cameras so footage is most useful for police. The fact that footage has been submitted is recorded in court papers, which will be accessible to the suspect and their lawyer (Netherlands Police, n.d.).

Research by the City of Amsterdam and AMS Institute's Responsible Sensing Lab showed that members of the public generally feel positively towards smart doorbells but have concerns around privacy, surveillance and legal implications. In response, universities, privacy activists and Dutch cities established the Smart Doorbell Consortium to conduct national research, explore regulatory and practical design solutions, and agree functional requirements for manufacturers (Responsible Sensing Lab, n.d).

Recommendations include urging device owners to display stickers telling visitors they are being recorded, using shutters and filters that limit the field of view or adjusting the timing of the doorbell sensor to ensure only those directly in front of it are filmed, and transferring all footage and data to a personal, secure environment controlled by the camera owner to better protect them from privacy breaches rather than using companies which make consumers pay a monthly subscription fee for cloud storage (Privacy First, 2025).

The Dutch example above shows that, rather than being an either/or, privacy and safety are closely linked. This matters because digital citizen evidence depends upon maintaining both public safety and public confidence.

The role of private companies, particularly around the management of sensitive data, also emerged as an important theme. The Police Foundation (2025) shows that, without the technology and support provided by private companies, policing would be unable to tackle the range and complexity of digital challenges it currently faces. Companies such as Ring, Eufy, Google and other IoT and journey camera providers may help police do their jobs more effectively. Box 7 below shows how private companies are working effectively with the police to aid in the sharing of evidence relating to retail crime.

### **Box 7: Auror and retail crime reporting**

No longer a low-level nuisance, retail crime is rising and becoming increasingly violent (British Retail Consortium, 2026). In October 2024, Devon and Cornwall Police partnered with Auror, which provides retail crime intelligence software. Other police forces have since followed suit.

The platform allows store managers to report an offence directly to police with accompanying evidence such as CCTV and statements to a court-ready standard. If the crime passes the appropriate threshold, the report is passed to police.

Devon and Cornwall Police state that the rate of Outcome 14, where the victim does not support further action, is 3.6% for Auror-reported crime, compared with 16.6% for crime reported through Single Online Home and 101 reports. It has been suggested this is linked to increased quality of reporting and earlier collection of evidence (College of Policing, 2025).

However, data still has to be processed, and crimes and offenders have to be linked manually. Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire Police have adopted the system and, in January 2026, launched a trial in which still images may be analysed using retrospective facial recognition to better link crimes and offenders (Retail Technology Innovation Hub, 2026).

The example illustrates both the operational benefits of earlier evidence collation and the need for strong governance when private platforms, automation and retrospective facial recognition are introduced.

However, private sector involvement also raises concerns about profit motives, overseas ownership, data sovereignty, exclusivity and public trust (The Police Foundation, 2025).

Focus group participants stated one of the most important considerations around adoption of such technologies was the security of data, with many expressing concern that their data was being collected and held by private sector companies based outside the UK. As one said: “I would have much more confidence in something that could be made here instead of being bought from a shareholder in China” (focus group participant).

However, while the public preferred solutions being developed in house by police, they were alive to the risk that other areas of policing might be cut in order to pay for them. As one focus group participant said:

*“They should pay more. They should be prepared to pay a bit more.... I think as long as it doesn’t come at the detriment of other resources being cut. Because we’ve already said about there not being enough police presence. So, yes, sure, that would be excellent and they should pay more for it. But if that means that we lose another 2,000 police officers to pay for it, is that beneficial in the long run? Potentially not.”*

*(Focus group participant)*

These concerns around secure storage of data are reflected in the academic literature. The complex and fragmented national and international picture, in which many of the private companies who are the big players in the game are based overseas mean that citizens find themselves in a particularly delicate situation since it is not clear which authorities and private actors have access to their data and which legal safeguards they are entitled to (Franssen and Tosza, 2025). Kim, Park and Lee (2020) found that while respondents were concerned about privacy, they were far more worried about data management. Particular concerns related to secondary organisations or agencies that handle the data inadvertently disclosing it, or else enabling it to be hacked by unscrupulous employees as has happened in some high profile US cases (Guariglia, 2023).

These worries will become more pressing as technologies become more sophisticated. Facial recognition, automated search and other AI-enabled capabilities may allow citizen-generated footage to be used not simply to record an incident, but to identify or track individuals. These future-facing risks are considered further in Section 7.

Digital citizen evidence therefore depends on maintaining both safety and privacy. Public confidence rests on the belief that these technologies can contribute to safety without creating disproportionate intrusions into private life. The key question, as Loader (2000) argues, is to ensure that these private companies beyond policing are appropriately regulated so that they operate in the public interest (The Police Foundation, 2025).

### **What this means in practice**

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Ensure requests for footage are lawful, necessary and proportionate to the seriousness and circumstances of the incident.
2. Provide clear public guidance on responsible use of smart doorbells, journey cameras, CCTV and other citizen-initiated surveillance devices.
3. Make clear how submitted footage will be stored, retained, shared and used.
4. Discourage public posting of footage where it risks public shaming, vigilantism, privacy breaches or compromising investigations.
5. Consider privacy risks at each stage of the evidence journey.
6. Apply stronger safeguards where technologies become more intrusive, including audio recording, facial recognition, automated tracking or bulk requests for footage.
7. Ensure private sector involvement is governed by transparency, accountability and public value.

## Test question

**Is the level of intrusion proportionate to the seriousness of the harm, the value of the evidence and the purpose for which it is being used?**

### Principle 4: Accessibility and inclusion

**Digital citizen evidence should be open to all communities, not only those who are digitally confident, technologically equipped or able to navigate complex reporting systems.**

The benefits of digital citizen evidence depend upon the ability of diverse communities to participate in reporting and evidence-sharing processes. However, workshop participants repeatedly highlighted the risk that digital systems may unintentionally exclude individuals who face language, accessibility, confidence or technological barriers.

Digital citizen evidence is often described as democratising security and evidence gathering. Falling prices mean that smart doorbells, journey cameras and connected devices are more widely available than in the past (Franssen and Tosza, 2025; The Police Foundation, 2025). Yet access remains uneven. Ownership of devices is likely to be shaped by income, housing type, digital literacy and confidence with technology. Either prospective device owners are forced to pay money up front to purchase smart doorbells with internal or local storage, or else they pay less money initially but then are locked into a monthly cloud subscription fee which can work out more expensive in the long run (Laughlin, 2024).

As one neighbourhood watch coordinator observed:

*"People live in less affluent [areas are] less likely to have it [Ring doorbells] but they're the ones [who] need it. Making security accessible for all important."*

*(Neighbourhood watch coordinator)*

Accessibility is not only about device ownership. It also concerns the ability to retrieve footage, understand what police need, complete online forms, upload material, communicate with officers

and respond to requests for further information. At each stage, barriers may arise.

One workshop participant noted:

*"There is evidence that can be collected by people who do not speak English as a first language. It's just about bearing in mind that whatever comes out of it is accessible."*

*(Workshop participant)*

Another participant observed:

*"Some of these technologies can have the effect of increasing access to services, as well as excluding people who might already be digitally excluded."*

*(Workshop participant)*

Accessibility must extend beyond the design of submission systems themselves. One participant said that people could submit on the platform he had created in any language, but that this was only useful if policing had the infrastructure to support it:

*"People can submit on [platform] in any language. But of course, if someone then submits in their native language, there needs to be the right process in policing to help with that."*

*(Workshop participant)*

This highlights the need for accessibility throughout the evidential journey. It is insufficient simply to permit submissions in multiple languages if forces lack the capability to triage, review, translate and process material efficiently once received. Similarly, the increasing volume of audio recordings, private messages and digital communications submitted as evidence creates additional demands for translation and interpretation services across policing (Lai, 2023; College of Policing, 2024).

Failure to address these barriers risks creating a system in which the voices most easily heard by policing are those of the most digitally connected citizens, potentially reproducing existing inequalities in access to justice and public participation.

### What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Embed accessibility into the design of digital citizen evidence systems from the outset.

2. Provide multilingual guidance and routes for submission.
3. Ensure submission platforms are compatible with assistive technologies.
4. Maintain alternative routes for citizens unable or unwilling to use digital channels.
5. Test systems with disabled users, older people, non-English speakers, digitally excluded groups and communities with lower trust in policing.
6. Ensure forces have processes to triage, translate and process evidence submitted in different languages or formats.
7. Avoid designing systems that require victims or witnesses to use specialist language or understand complex evidential requirements before their experiences are taken seriously.
8. Treat accessibility as a core governance principle rather than an afterthought.

### Test question

**Could someone with limited English, low digital confidence, a disability, no specialist technology or low trust in police participate meaningfully in this process?**

### Principle 5:

#### **Accountability, Feedback and Procedural Fairness**

**Digital citizen evidence should not disappear into a black hole; citizens should receive acknowledgement, explanation and proportionate feedback.**

Public willingness to share digital citizen evidence is conditional and fragile. Members of the public may be willing to provide information and footage, but their willingness to do so in future is shaped by what happens after they submit it. If evidence appears to disappear without acknowledgement, explanation or outcome, digital citizen evidence may damage rather than strengthen confidence.

As Wells and Amietta (2024) found, there was a “reservoir” of goodwill relating to sharing footage with the police and believing they will act on

it. However, this reservoir is not bottomless and risk drying out if the police do not respond appropriately, or worse, give no response at all.

Research on procedural justice suggests that people are more likely to perceive institutions as legitimate when decision-making processes are transparent, respectful and fair, even when outcomes are disappointing. From this perspective, feedback should not be viewed as a customer-service enhancement or optional extra. Rather, it forms part of the procedural justice infrastructure necessary to sustain public trust and confidence (Tyler, 2006; Myhill and Bradford, 2012).

A workshop participant described why feedback is so crucial, not only to the effectiveness of the process, but to its entire legitimacy:

*“At the end, acknowledge that they’ve done it, even if nothing happened with it. Public willingness is fragile. You don’t get many hits to empower people and to have trust and confidence and feel that you’re legitimate in asking.”*

*(Workshop participant)*

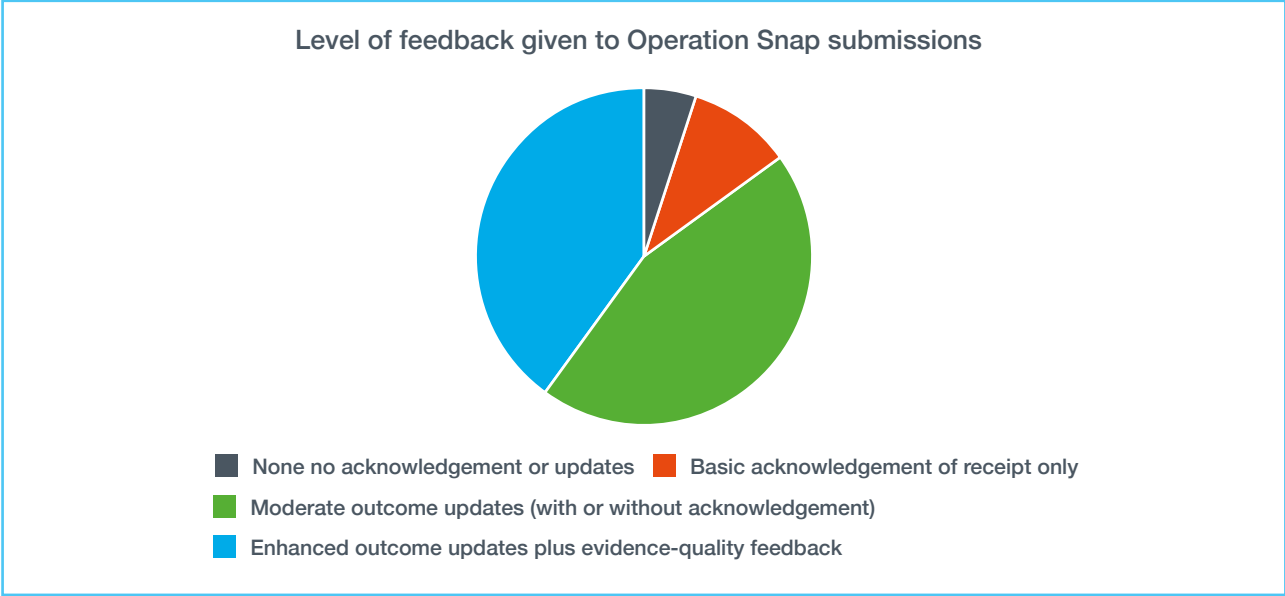
However, as Wells and Amietta (2024) explain, there is no obligation for police forces to give feedback. Under current practice, those who submit to Operation Snap are perceived to be witnesses rather than victims and so are subject to the Witness Charter rather than the Victims Charter. The Witness Charter only suggests that updates should be given on the progress of cases, whereas the Victims Charter creates an obligation to inform victims about the outcome of their case. In practice this means that there is no obligation for forces to tell submitters the outcome of their submission, or to give them any feedback to improve future submissions going forward.

This lack of an obligation to give feedback means that the experiences of submitters can vary widely between forces. Figure 12, based on our force survey data, shows the variation in feedback given, from a basic acknowledgement that a response had been received to an enhanced outcome update which not only let the submitter know whether or not the response would be sent to prosecution, but also whether anything could be done to improve the quality of their response.

All but two forces offered some kind of feedback. Most acknowledged receipt of the submission and let the submitter know whether or not their submission would lead to an outcome. Around 40% offered enhanced feedback, in that they explained the outcome and then specified why the submission had or had not been successful.

Many of the police officers we spoke to felt the status quo was the correct one, echoing comments given to Wells and Amietta (2024) by police participants that submitters were witnesses to incidents and therefore should not be treated as victims (often because of the absence of any physical harm), or that meeting the workload

**Figure 12: The nature of feedback given by police forces to those who submit under Operation Snap (source, force survey)**



implications of recognising submitters as victims would be impossible since they could not meet the demand posed by current victims let alone respond to new ones.

However, interviews with submitters suggested that this lack of updates or feedback, made them feel as though they were a “source of information” to be exploited, rather than someone co-producing safety with police.

One workshop participant described the current experience thus:

*“Operation Snap feels like a black hole. You might get an email saying that they were doing Notice of Intended Prosecution, but that is it. Other forces say ‘positive action’, whatever that means.”*

Similarly, one interviewee, a cycle campaigner, said that people were deterred from submitting because “they don’t get any feedback. You don’t know what’s happened” (Cycle campaigner).

This feeling of being left “firing into a void” as another interviewee put it, is worse for those who have undergone a close pass or narrowly

avoided a potentially fatal collision. Since such an experience can be “scary” as an earlier comment explained, submitters may suffer from emotional harm and can be “intimidated off the road”.

One focus group participant who had been subjected to a near miss said the fact that she was not treated as a victim and so not given updates on the progress of her case was “deeply insulting” and amounted to a double standard. She said:

*“it was luck I didn’t get injured, I didn’t die. I am a victim, I spend months thinking about [the] incident, I am [a] victim, I can’t sleep at night for days afterwards, I am a victim. All these responses are natural after having my life put in danger.... If someone waved a knife but didn’t harm you, everyone accepts you are a victim.”*

Wells and Amietta (2024) therefore recommend that that further work could usefully explore the consequences and significance of labelling submitters as victims or witnesses, noting that this emotional harm means they should in theory qualify as victims under The Victims’ Code, which identifies a victim as a person “who has suffered

harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence”.

A focus group with members of the public who regularly report to the police said that lack of feedback and poor transparency affects confidence, heightened by the lack of consistency across the country. Moreover, it actually increases the burden on the police, since, in not giving feedback, they are losing out on opportunities to improve relations with the public and to educate road users about how to produce better quality submissions that were more likely to lead to positive action.

The group emphasised the importance of transparency for public confidence, including publishing data and sharing it with local councils, adding that so few police services publish their outcome data and those that do often use inaccessible or hard to understand formats.

One said: “Our position is that feedback is essential for citizen participation, failing to do that is a failure of the system” (Road crime reporters’ network).

Digital citizen evidence creates opportunities for policing, but only if the material submitted meets the standards required for investigation and enforcement. Footage may be blurry, incomplete or captured from a poor angle. A journey camera may fail to capture a registration plate. A smart doorbell may record activity before or after an incident without capturing the critical moment itself. Material may be technically authentic but evidentially weak, or highly relevant but incapable of proving the issue in dispute.

In these circumstances, offering feedback does not only ensure that submitters feel more like they are working with police to produce safety than being used by them, it also leads to a better quality of submissions, and to closure for submitters, even if they did not get the outcome they wished for.

One police interviewee explained what enhanced feedback looked like as a process:

*“Someone making frequent submission[s] to Op Snap, for example a cycle commuter, we will phone them, tell them whether this is helpful, or what they could do better”*

*(Senior police staff)*

Another officer involved in delivering Operation Snap explained how the process of giving feedback, as well as advances of technology, meant that quality of submissions had “massively improved”. He gave an example of someone who had received a dashcam for their birthday and would submit seven or eight times in quick succession. He said, “we’d work with them as they become the biggest submitter, we’d get to the point where we understand each other and they’re not wasting time”.

Participants repeatedly emphasised that submitters were often willing to accept decisions not to prosecute if those decisions were adequately explained. As one said:

*“If you know why stuff isn’t being prosecuted, then you won’t submit it, so you’re not wasting an officer’s time, and in future your evidence will be better. Whereas if you’re not being told these things, then you’re just going to carry on submitting or stop submitting altogether because nothing’s happening.”*

*(Workshop participant)*

Another added: “There needs to be so much better guidance from the police about what is actually admissible. There’s so many little bits and pieces of information that are hidden away, or just not publicly known.” (Workshop participant)

Participants suggested practical measures, including automated outcome updates, anonymised examples of good reports, user accounts that pre populate personal details, and regular local reviews of statistics and ‘no further action’ decisions. These proposals echo procedural justice research suggesting transparency and explanation matter even when enforcement outcomes are limited.

Feedback is all the more important when chances of visible contact with police are limited – research by Bradford et al. (2022), shows that technologically mediated contact between police and public may make policing, literally and figuratively, more distant, with consequences for trust and confidence.

As one interviewee put it:

*"People think if they don't see the police, the police aren't doing anything. Two-way feedback and sharing shows they are."*

*(Police/supermarket liaison)*

### What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Acknowledge receipt of digital citizen evidence.
2. Provide outcome updates where proportionate and possible.
3. Explain why evidence did or did not lead to action.
4. Provide evidence-quality feedback where this would improve future submissions.
5. Publish anonymised examples of good reports and common reasons for no further action.
6. Reduce postcode variation in feedback and transparency.
7. Treat feedback as part of procedural justice, not simply customer service.
8. Recognise that closing the loop with submitters supports both legitimacy and operational efficiency.

### Test question

**Would a reasonable member of the public understand what happened to their evidence, why that decision was made and what they could do differently in future?**

#### Principle 6: Evidential Integrity and Quality

**Digital citizen evidence should be capable of becoming reliable evidence, not merely information.**

Digital citizen evidence can only support policing if it can be trusted. Members of the public may submit footage, screenshots, audio recordings, messages or data generated by connected devices in good faith, but the existence of digital material does not automatically make it evidence. A video clip, image or recording may contain useful information, yet before it can support

investigation, prosecution or safeguarding it must be shown to be authentic, relevant and reliable. The challenge for policing is to ensure that citizen-generated information can become evidence that investigators, prosecutors, courts and the public are willing to trust.

As one workshop participant observed: "Citizen evidence is not automatically evidence. Without clear guidance and integrity controls and verification steps, all of this third-party material can be potentially unusable or contested." (Workshop participant)

Citizen-generated material may contain useful information, but information and evidence are not the same thing. As Ng et al. (2025) argue, data from a device does not automatically become evidence. Only once it has been extracted, preserved and analysed using appropriate forensic methods can it become digital forensic evidence. Investigators, prosecutors, defence lawyers and courts need confidence that material is genuine, that it has not been altered and that it can be traced back to its original source. The evidential value of a file therefore depends upon preserving provenance, metadata and chain of custody throughout the evidence journey.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of preserving integrity throughout the evidential lifecycle. One described the need for systems that are:

*"Explicit and auditable, understood by officers, the public, the law, the lawyers, the jurors."*

*(Workshop participant)*

Another stressed the need to:

*"Retain the integrity of a one and a zero as it makes its way all the way through from source all the way through to court."*

*(Workshop participant)*

These observations highlight an important point. Digital citizen evidence must survive not only police review but also legal challenge. Therefore it is necessary to preserve confidence in that evidence from source to court.

The way evidence is captured, transferred and stored can significantly affect its evidential value.

The Kulpa Police Platform, see Box 8, provides an example of how victim-held evidence can be collected in ways that preserve evidential integrity while reducing intrusion for victims. The platform captures original native files together with associated metadata, including date, time and location information. Once evidence is shared with police it is locked to prevent further alteration, creating a clear audit trail from submission through to investigation.

The significance of systems such as Kulpa is their ability to preserve provenance. By retaining original files, metadata and evidential continuity, they demonstrate how citizen-generated information can be transformed into material capable of supporting criminal justice processes. It also illustrates how better-designed digital processes can reduce unnecessary demand on specialist resources.

#### **Box 8: Kulpa and victim-held digital evidence**

High attrition rates in domestic abuse cases have been linked to poor communication with victims and failures in effectively collecting evidence (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2025). In order to improve victim confidence and increase positive outcomes, Hertfordshire Police signed up with the Kulpa Police Platform as a way of gaining evidence from domestic abuse victims without the need to download their phones, which can be costly and intrusive.

Officially launched in April 2025, the platform enables victims to upload evidence to a secure cloud through a downloadable app. The app enables them to share data including smart doorbell footage, social media material, WhatsApp exports, videos and audio files. The system guides submitters in the best evidence to share and the best way to display it.

When uploading information, the original native file is captured along with metadata, including time, date and location information, enabling the file to become verified digital forensic

evidence. The victim chooses when to share evidence with police. When they have made the decision to share, the evidence is “locked” so that it cannot be altered and then exhibited in a nationally agreed format. Officers and staff can then review evidence and download it in a format compliant with criminal procedure rules, complete with a signed MG11 statement.

An inspector at Hertfordshire explained that the average Kulpa download was 200 megabytes, compared with several gigabytes for a normal case. Phones are still being downloaded in a minority of cases, but demand placed on mobile digital forensic vans has been cut by 80%. The inspector said the system saves on average 7.5 hours per case and that stalking and harassment conviction rates have increased. He added that the main benefit has been to victims, who are empowered to share the evidence they want police to see and to do so when they decide.

Kulpa is now used in Hertfordshire for a wide range of offences and is being trialled in Jersey.

As digital citizen evidence becomes an increasingly routine part of policing, preserving this evidential integrity will become ever more important.

Evidence must be capable of moving securely between citizens, investigators, prosecutors and courts without losing authenticity or reliability (Casey, 2019; Tang, 2025)

The need for evidential integrity becomes even more important in an era of synthetic media. Digital evidence has always been vulnerable to alteration and manipulation. However, developments in generative artificial intelligence have created new opportunities for the rapid production of convincing but fabricated images, audio recordings and video content. Deepfakes now extend beyond video to include synthetic voices, photographs and other forms of digital media (Qureshi et al., 2024).

As Hamilton and Okeowo (2025) argue, generative artificial intelligence creates an environment in which wrongdoers may increasingly claim that genuine evidence has been manipulated, while fabricated material may be presented as authentic.

The challenge for policing goes beyond identifying false evidence to demonstrating that genuine evidence is real. This raises the importance of metadata, audit trails, verification processes and secure methods of collection (Singh and Dhumane, 2025).

As digital technologies become more sophisticated, confidence in evidence will depend increasingly upon the ability to demonstrate where material came from, how it was processed and whether it has been altered.

The legitimacy of digital citizen evidence rests on ensuring that information that is collected by citizens can survive scrutiny and become evidence capable of supporting fair and effective decision-making (Casey, 2019; Tang, 2025).

### **What this means in practice**

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Provide clear guidance on what constitutes usable and evidentially valuable material.
2. Build submission routes that preserve original files and metadata wherever possible.
3. Use secure systems that maintain audit trails and evidential continuity.
4. Ensure evidence can move securely from source to court.
5. Develop verification processes capable of responding to deepfakes and AI-generated media.
6. Invest in digital forensic capability, training and quality assurance.
7. Recognise that provenance, authenticity and integrity are as important as the content of the evidence itself.
8. Ensure third-party material is not treated as evidential until relevance, provenance and integrity have been assessed.

### **Test question**

**Could this material withstand scrutiny from source to court, with its authenticity, provenance, integrity and relevance clearly demonstrated?**

### **Principle 7: Triage, Human Oversight and Automation**

**Automation should help police manage volume and improve triage, but professional judgement should remain accountable and human-led.**

Triage is the central operational requirement for managing digital citizen evidence at scale. Manual review of every submission in depth is neither realistic nor sustainable given current and projected volumes. Research into digital forensics suggests that triage has emerged as one of the most important responses to the growing disparity between the volume of digital evidence entering policing and the resources available to examine it, enabling investigators to identify potentially relevant material at an early stage and prioritise cases according to risk, relevance and evidential value (Jusas, Birvinskas and Gahramanov, 2017; Warner et al., 2025).

Effective triage involves early assessment of relevance, quality and priority, allowing forces to focus scarce specialist resources where they will have the greatest impact. Without triage, all evidence competes equally for attention, regardless of seriousness or potential harm. The College of Policing notes that triage has increasingly been recognised as a means of addressing digital forensic backlogs and helping frontline officers make more consistent and evidence-based decisions about digital evidence (Warner et al., 2025).

Early triage, and then swift feedback, can also protect victims and witnesses from unnecessary engagement where evidence does not meet thresholds, reducing frustration and confusion.

Citizen-generated material may be evidentially significant, but it frequently arrives in high-volume, mixed-quality and time-critical contexts. While submissions may mean officers receive relevant

material earlier, they may still lack the tools to interpret it, particularly where it is in a language other than English.

In a multicultural and multilingual society, an increasing amount of digital citizen evidence, including audio from smart doorbells, WhatsApp messages and other private communications, may be submitted in languages other than English (Lai, 2023). These private messages and audio files have become increasingly important in criminal investigations. Although the original audio or text is the primary evidence and the transcript is secondary, it is often the transcript on which courts rely (Lai, 2023).

Investigative materials may need to be translated into English as part of the investigative process. However, translation can be expensive and time-consuming, and not all material collected will be relevant. Before deciding whether to translate, interpreters need the skills to distinguish evidential from non-evidential material (College of Policing, 2024). Box 9 below explains how effective triage works.

Several interviewees argued that policing needs better tools to: “sort the wheat from the chaff.” (Senior police lead).

This is exactly the logic behind AI-enabled triage. Automation and AI may assist with classification, prioritisation, transcription, translation, duplicate identification, metadata extraction and workflow

#### **Box 9: Warwickshire police and language triage**

Warwickshire Police faced a common challenge affecting forces nationally: a growing volume of citizen-generated foreign-language audio and documents submitted as part of an active investigation. Under standard procedures, all material would have required full professional transcription and translation by fully vetted, security-cleared linguists, at a projected cost of £4,928. This was not proportionate or affordable given operational and budget constraints.

Working with the translation company Dals, Warwickshire Police adopted an interpreter-led triage approach to manage the material more efficiently while maintaining evidential integrity. A security-cleared interpreter, meeting policing and ISO 17100 standards, reviewed all audio files in full and advised investigators on which recordings contained relevant or potentially evidential content and which did not. This initial triage cost £131.67.

Only the audio identified as relevant was then progressed through Dals’ full, ISO-aligned transcription and translation workflow, including quality assurance, auditability and secure delivery. The revised transcription and translation work totalled £664.00.

As a result, Warwickshire Police reduced total spend to £795.67, securing the necessary evidential material for 16% of the original projected cost and achieving savings of 84%. Crucially, all material relied upon continued to meet legal, ethical and procedural standards. By triaging foreign-language material before committing to full processing, the force reduced unnecessary cost and investigator burden while preserving evidential reliability.

management. Recent policing initiatives have highlighted the potential of AI-assisted tools to review large volumes of digital material rapidly, support evidence disclosure and improve investigative efficiency (Europol, 2024). However, policing organisations and researchers consistently emphasise that such technologies should support rather than replace professional judgement. Transparency, explainability, accountability and human oversight remain essential safeguards wherever automated systems are used to influence operational decision-making (Europol, 2024)

As one participant said in relation to forensic processing:

*“We might use AI to guide our users. We might use AI to guide our own development. But the processing, the parsing of information is purely forensic.”*

*(Workshop participant)*

### Box 10: CSAS Find, SOLV and frontline triage

Frontline officers are increasingly receiving citizen-generated digital material linked to missing persons, acquisitive crime and organised criminality. While specialist digital units have advanced analytical platforms, frontline staff often have bulk data and need to make decisions without the necessary tools or training. As one practitioner noted:

“People had the data but didn’t know how to read it.” (Practitioner)

Delays in understanding early indicators can mean risk escalates before insight is obtained. Forces are using CSAS Find as a frontline-accessible digital triage platform, enabling officers to engage with citizen-generated digital evidence at the earliest stage.

Through a browser-based, mobile-friendly interface, officers can visualise call data, locations and points of interest on maps; automatically plot time and date-stamped activity; identify regular locations; and see patterns, associations and context without manual spreadsheet analysis.

Where digital evidence indicates a probable geographic area, CSAS Find insight can feed directly into SOLV, enabling police to quickly enlist help from the public. Cell site and digital data can identify the likely search area, allowing SOLV to deliver targeted broadcast messages to devices within that area. The local community can then respond with citizen-generated material relevant to the missing person.

As described in practice:

“You pin down the area someone is likely to be using cell site digital data, use SOLV to broadcast targeted messaging, the community responds - and the missing person is found.” (Practitioner)

As a result:

“Medium risk incidents don’t become high risk because the signs are spotted sooner.”

(Practitioner)

Taken together, these tools enable frontline teams to gain rapid insight from data already held. They help investigators prioritise relevance, intervene earlier and reduce bottlenecks caused by expensive and limited specialist resources. They also show how digital citizen evidence can support active public mobilisation, not simply passive evidence uploads.

A workshop participant similarly highlighted triage as the most promising immediate use of AI, while stressing that it depends on data quality:

*“I think the biggest potential for it is probably in triage, but you need the better data to make that work.”*

(Workshop participant)

As one senior lead put it:

*“The technology is not the barrier. The money and management of the service and how it fits in is the challenge.”*

(Police DDAT lead)

The principle is therefore not anti-automation. Without better triage and workflow tools, policing is likely to be overwhelmed by the volume of digital citizen evidence. But automation must be introduced in ways that are explainable, auditable and human-led.

## What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Use automation to support triage and workflow management.
2. Ensure human review remains central to safeguarding, investigation and enforcement decisions.
3. Make AI-enabled systems auditable and explainable.
4. Invest in data quality and common standards before relying on automation.
5. Use automation to reduce manual burden, not to remove accountability.
6. Use early triage to reduce unnecessary extraction, transcription, translation and specialist processing.
7. Ensure the public and officers understand where automated tools are being used and who remains responsible for decisions.

## Test question

**Does this technology help police make better decisions, or is it making decisions that should remain subject to professional judgement?**

## Principle 8: Interoperability, Consistency and National Standards

### Digital citizen evidence should not depend on postcode, platform or supplier.

This report has shown that the way police handle digital citizen evidence is fragmented, with different practices operating across the country. In recent years there has been growing recognition that integration and economies of scale are necessary to improve service in the face of increasing demand.

In the case of Operation Snap in particular, where people may submit to multiple forces depending on where they live and work, inconsistent reporting practices across forces impacted their trust and confidence in the system as a whole.

As one road safety campaigner put it: “Operation Snap to me should be standardised, it should be across all the UK. Each police force should follow the right procedures and train staff properly.”

For roads policing, this is centred on Operation Topaz, a strategic partnership between the NPCC and the Department for Transport. Operation Topaz aims to coordinate policy, practice and capability so that roads policing can respond to emerging threats and risks and support innovation. Interviewees argued that a more coordinated approach could support the development of a more consistent national approach to Operation Snap, improve routes for academic evaluation, set minimum standards for transparency and feedback, and align funding streams and shared objectives. (Senior police lead)

The move towards a new National Police Service, as set out in the Police Reform White Paper, also brings renewed focus on setting national standards for technology and for buying and developing new technologies nationally (Home Office, 2026). If introduced, the National Police Service would host a new national forensics service offering a standardised service, with a view to reducing backlogs and delays in managing evidence (Home Office, 2026).

When it comes to digital evidence management and public contact more generally, a White Paper published by Content Guru and the NPCC sets out a vision of a “One Standard, One Platform, One Contact” model. This seeks to remove postcode variation by replacing disconnected local systems with a shared capability built once and scaled nationally, giving every neighbourhood the same clear, intuitive experience focused on common standards, shared data and unified platforms. This is reflected in the launch of the National MyPolice Portal, being trialled in South Yorkshire Police, which aims to give victims a simple, secure route to two-way updates (NPCC and Content Guru, 2026).

Stakeholders supported greater national coordination, but argued that national consistency would only be achieved if accompanied by meaningful interoperability between policing systems and suppliers.

Participants at a workshop consistently identified interoperability as one of the most significant barriers to the future development of digital citizen evidence. The issue was framed not as a problem of individual technologies, but of the standards governing them.

As one participant said:

*"Standards would be a huge step forward. The standards aren't there to say, if we procure your system nationally or per force or per region, it's got to have these endpoints. We want these hooks. We want to be able to delve in with a known user who's given footage to say something's changed".*

*(Workshop participant)*

Other participants drew a distinction between standardisation and centralisation. Rather than advocating for a single national platform, they favoured nationally agreed standards that enable different systems to work together.

As one participant stated:

*"I want big, I want national, but not single point of failure dependency. If you agree standards and you've got a better system in Dorset than you have in another area, then they should talk."*

*(Workshop participant)*

This reflects a vision of interoperability based on common standards, application programming interfaces (APIs), shared metadata structures and agreed evidential requirements, rather than a single technology supplier or platform. Innovation can continue locally, provided systems are capable of exchanging data in a consistent and secure manner.

The urgency of resolving interoperability challenges was linked to wider police reform. A workshop participant warned:

*"Unless we have the standards right now and make the technology work, in four years' time we'll be in the same position where nothing connects and we've got four forces turning into one force and they can't talk to each other."*

*(Workshop participant)*

Participants therefore viewed interoperability as a strategic requirement for the future of policing. Without common standards, digital citizen

evidence will remain fragmented and difficult to scale. With them, it could become a routine and integrated component of modern policing.

### What this means in practice

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Establish national standards for digital citizen evidence submission, storage and processing.
2. Require interoperability through procurement and supplier contracts.
3. Develop common metadata, API and evidential requirements.
4. Reduce postcode variation in submission routes, feedback and outcomes.
5. Support local innovation where systems can connect to wider policing infrastructure.
6. Avoid creating single points of failure or unnecessary supplier dependency.
7. Treat interoperability as a core operational requirement, not an optional technical enhancement.
8. Ensure evidence can move securely and efficiently through policing, prosecution and court systems.

### Test question

**Would a citizen, officer or investigator receive a broadly consistent service and evidential process regardless of force area, platform or supplier?**

### Principle 9: Managed Demand and Public Expectations

**Police should encourage useful public participation while being honest about capacity, thresholds and likely outcomes.**

Digital citizen evidence creates a dilemma at the heart of policing. Police wish to encourage public reporting and recognise the value of citizen-generated material, yet they are also concerned about creating demand they lack the resources to process.

This dilemma appeared repeatedly in interviews and survey responses. Forces recognised that

more could be done to promote public awareness of digital citizen evidence and the benefits it could bring to policing. Some forces have promoted submission platforms or camera registration schemes. Yet others have limited proactive reporting because of concerns about irrelevant submissions, resource pressures and storage costs.

One survey response noted that Single Online Home had the capability to allow media uploads, but the force chose to switch it off:

*"Due to the high number of irrelevant submissions being received and the impact on limited resources."*

*(Force survey response)*

One senior police leader working in digital data and analytics described the problem starkly:

*"You open up new contact channel – you find more unmet demand, we don't have more people... we don't have capacity to process... we're not short of work already, there are plenty of crimes we're not investigating that are formally reported let alone adding on another layer of things."*

*(DDAT lead)*

He added that this demand was exacerbated by the "prevalence of media and smartphones" and the public expectation that police would take enforcement action. There therefore needed to be a focus on "managing expectations".

Some officers expressed concern that if submitting "became a low tariff activity, the public would lack the judgement to determine what was worth submitting. One police leader said:

*"Ideally people would make smart decisions to send important stuff, but we won't get that – they'll treat it as a free tab at the bar."*

*(DDAT lead)*

These concerns are justified. Opening a new digital reporting channel may reveal large volumes of unmet demand. It may also create public expectations that all footage will be reviewed, all wrongdoing will be acted upon and all submissions will receive a response. Without triage, guidance and feedback, such systems may overwhelm already stretched teams.

However, workshop participants warned against allowing fear of demand to prevent policing from making use of the opportunity. They argued that a reactive approach meant police were missing opportunities to engage with the public, educate them about how to submit better evidence, proactively solve crimes and prevent further offending.

One speaker argued:

*"Something about the delivery model in policing needs to evolve."* (Workshop participant)

Another suggested that rather than making generalisations about floodgates being opened, police should focus on creating a high-quality customer journey for members of the public who submit evidence.

As one workshop participant said:

*"Policing thinks the more evidence, the more the jeopardy is at play, the more you need to be cautious. But actually, policing needs to find a way of exploiting the opportunity without panicking, without... allowing that kind of inherent risk aversion that exists in policing to push it into missing the opportunity completely."*

*(Workshop participant)*

Surrey Police's suspicious activity portal provides one example of expectation management. The force tells submitters that it appreciates and reviews every submission, but cannot respond to every clip because of volume. It explains that members of the public may only receive a reply if their footage is key evidence or if clarification is needed, while reassuring them that submissions contribute to protecting communities (Surrey Police, 2022).

This kind of upfront communication is important because unmanaged expectations can damage legitimacy. If members of the public believe they have submitted clear evidence but hear nothing back, they may conclude police have ignored them. If they understand from the outset what will happen, what thresholds apply and why not every submission can generate action, they may be more likely to accept disappointing outcomes.

The answer is neither opening the floodgates nor suppressing public participation. It is to design

systems that help the public submit the right evidence in the right way, allow police to triage and prioritise effectively, and set clear expectations about what evidence can and cannot achieve.

### **What this means in practice**

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Be clear about what types of evidence are useful and what thresholds apply.
2. Manage public expectations about likely outcomes and timescales.
3. Use triage to prioritise evidence according to seriousness, risk and evidential value.
4. Avoid opening submission routes without the ability to process material effectively.
5. Educate the public so future submissions are more relevant and higher quality.
6. Design a high-quality journey for members of the public who submit evidence.
7. Provide upfront information about whether and when submitters can expect acknowledgement, updates or feedback.
8. Treat demand management as part of public participation.

### **Test question**

**Does this process help the public submit the right evidence in the right way, while making clear what police can and cannot do with it?**

## **Principle 10: Effectiveness and Public Value**

**Digital citizen evidence should deliver measurable public benefit and contribute to safer communities.**

The previous principles have largely covered legitimacy, privacy, accessibility and accountability, which are essential considerations. However, systems that are fair, transparent and trusted must also be capable of achieving the outcomes for which they were established.

This report has outlined a number of examples which demonstrate the potential of digital citizen evidence to contribute to prevention, deterrence, investigation and safeguarding. They also show that the way systems are designed and governed can influence the quality of evidence submitted, the efficiency with which it is processed and the likelihood that it leads to positive outcomes.

The evidence gathered for this report suggests that digital citizen evidence, if used ethically and effectively, has the potential to deliver significant public value. Participants described improvements in evidential quality, reductions in investigative burden and opportunities to address harmful behaviour that might otherwise go undetected. In roads policing particularly, citizen-generated footage has enabled police forces to identify and prosecute dangerous driving, while also creating opportunities for education, behaviour change and harm prevention.

At the same time, effectiveness should not be assumed. The existence of technology, public demand or high volumes of submissions does not in itself demonstrate public benefit. Throughout this research, concerns were raised about fragmented systems, inconsistent approaches, variable feedback mechanisms and limited evaluation of outcomes. In some areas there is evidence of effectiveness; in others, the evidence remains limited.

This is particularly true of emerging technologies. Smart doorbells, connected devices, automated triage and AI-assisted review may offer significant opportunities, but their wider impact on crime prevention, public confidence, privacy and community cohesion is not yet well understood. Decisions about investment, expansion and adoption should therefore be informed by evidence rather than technological optimism.

Effectiveness should be understood broadly. It includes not only arrests, prosecutions and sanctions, but also crime prevention, deterrence, safeguarding, harm reduction, public confidence, evidential quality and the efficient use of public resources. Different forms of digital citizen evidence may contribute to these outcomes in different ways. For example, Operation Snap data

showing potential collision hotspots could be better shared with local authorities to enable them to improve the design of roads and enhance their safety.

The challenge for policing is to ensure that digital citizen evidence is used in ways that create demonstrable public value and improve outcomes for victims, communities and the wider public.

### **What this means in practice**

To uphold this principle, policing should:

1. Evaluate whether digital citizen evidence contributes to identifiable public safety outcomes.
2. Establish baseline measures and identify examples of effective practice.
3. Assess the impact of digital citizen evidence on prevention, deterrence, investigation, safeguarding and public confidence.
4. Consider both intended and unintended consequences.
5. Prioritise approaches that demonstrate measurable public value.
6. Ensure investment decisions are guided by evidence of effectiveness as well as considerations of privacy, accountability and fairness.
7. Regularly review whether systems remain proportionate to the benefits they deliver.
8. Share learning and evidence of what works across policing and criminal justice partners.

### **Test question**

**Does this approach deliver demonstrable public value and improve outcomes for victims, communities or public safety, and is there evidence that these benefits justify the resources, risks and intrusions involved?**



# 8. EMERGING RISKS: LIVE FACIAL RECOGNITION AND AI

The governance principles set out above will become increasingly important as citizen-initiated surveillance technologies become more sophisticated. Smart doorbells, CCTV systems and journey cameras are no longer simply passive recording devices. Increasingly, they are capable of being combined with artificial intelligence, automated search and facial recognition technologies. AI-enabled dashcams are being developed which can identify and coach at-risk driving behaviours and prevent collisions before they happen (Jones, 2024). These technologies create new opportunities for investigation, but also raise significant questions about proportionality, purpose limitation, private sector involvement and public consent.

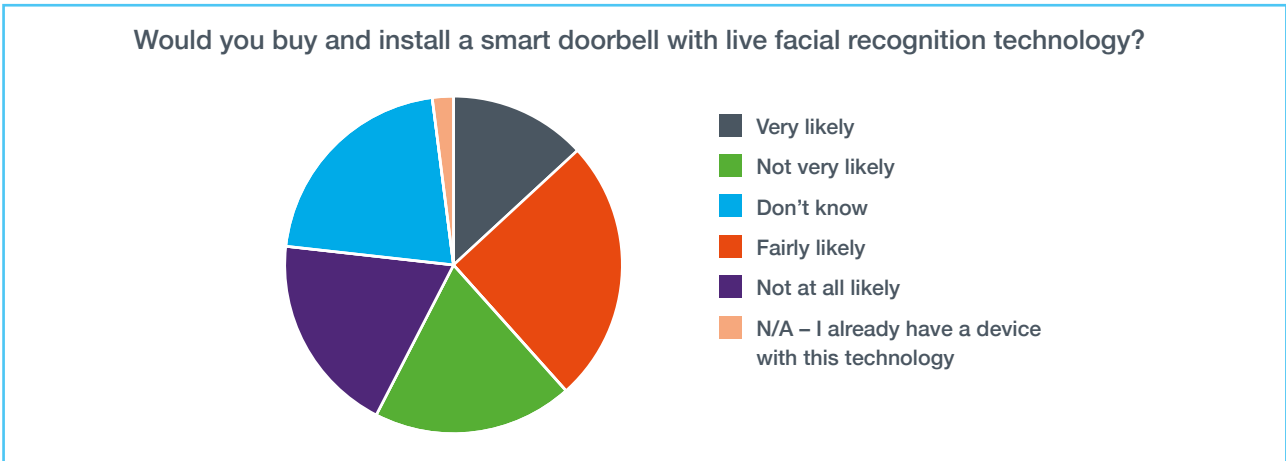
In February 2026, the US Super Bowl made headlines for reasons that had nothing to do with baseball. During the game, an advert was shown for Amazon Ring's 'Search Party' feature. This enabled users to upload a photo of a missing dog through the Ring app, which then alerted nearby cameras to use AI to look for a match. While Ring insisted the feature was intended only for pets, critics argued that the pet-recovery narrative masked the normalisation of mass surveillance and that the same technical capability could potentially be used to track people. The feature

was automatically enabled, meaning those who did not wish to use it had to actively opt out.

Concerns were heightened because Ring was exploring a partnership with Flock Safety, whose automated licence plate reader networks are widely used by law enforcement in the United States (Chidi, 2026). Critics feared that, through such partnerships, tracking technologies could be passed to law enforcement and used for intrusive or discriminatory purposes (Desmond, 2026; Hays, 2026). Following the backlash, while Search Party was not cancelled, the separate 'Community Request' arrangement with Flock Safety was withdrawn (Desmond, 2026).

The US context is distinct, particularly given its history of police-community relations. Nevertheless, the example highlights a wider governance problem: technologies designed for one purpose can create possibilities for another. A tool developed to locate missing pets can raise questions about tracking people. A device purchased for reassurance can become part of a wider surveillance network. A platform developed by a private company can become entangled with law enforcement requests. These risks make purpose limitation, transparency and proportionality essential.

**Figure 13: The public and live facial recognition (source, YouGov)**



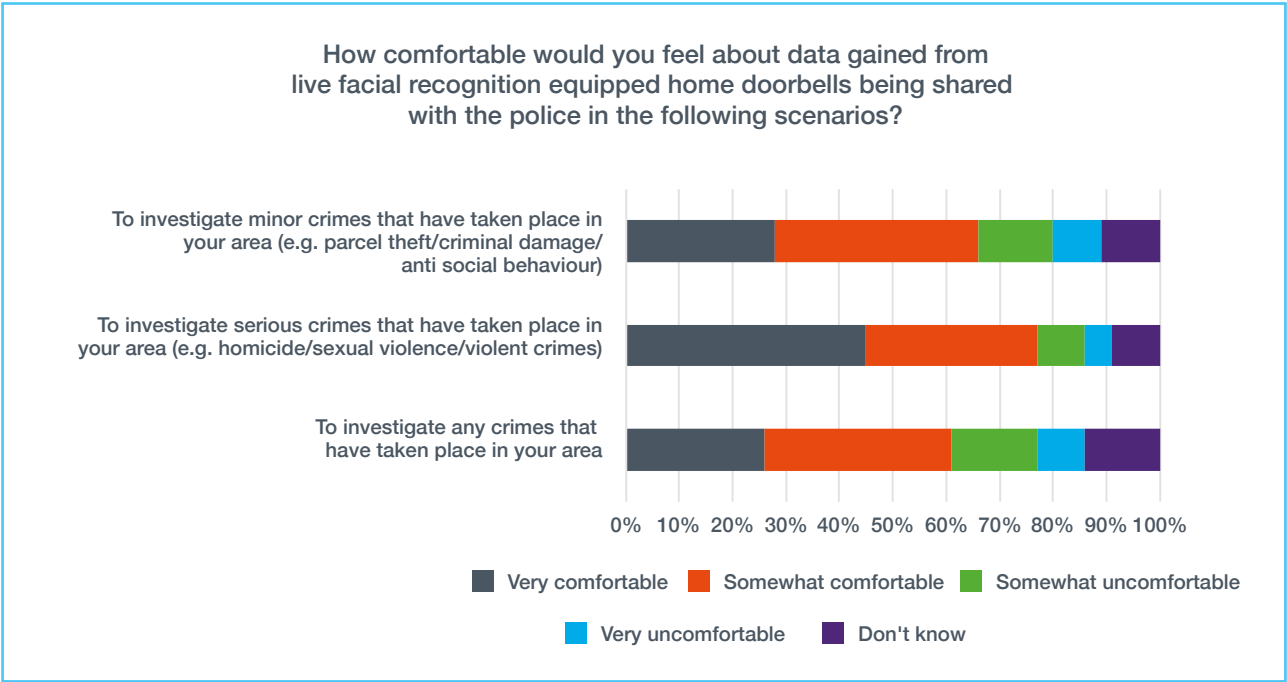
Survey data commissioned for this report found that respondents were split on whether they would upgrade their smart doorbells to include facial recognition, with 38% saying they were very or fairly likely to do so, and 38% saying they were not very likely or not at all likely.

However, while there was ambivalence around whether members of the public would buy a smart doorbell equipped with facial recognition, there was less uncertainty when it came to sharing evidence generated from it with police. As Figure 14 shows, our survey results suggest

that the public are more likely than not to be willing to share footage with police. However, that willingness is nuanced. It varies with perceived crime seriousness and is shaped by perceptions of police legitimacy, proportionality and fairness.

UK research similarly suggests that public acceptability of police live facial recognition is conditional rather than absolute. Bradford et al. (2020) found police legitimacy to be the strongest predictor of public support for live facial recognition deployment, with approval significantly higher for serious threats such as terrorism than

**Figure 14: The public, live facial recognition and the police (source, YouGov)**



for minor offences. Similar findings were reported by the Ada Lovelace Institute (2019), which highlighted the importance of proportionality, purpose limitation and robust safeguards. This variation in comfort with sharing this footage with the police is reflected in Home Office (2025) research into facial recognition technologies more generally. The majority of respondents who indicated that they either trust the police completely (81%) or trust the police somewhat (72%) also supported the use of facial recognition technology in policing, whereas overall support for police use of the technology was lower among respondents who indicated that they do not trust the police very much (46%) or do not

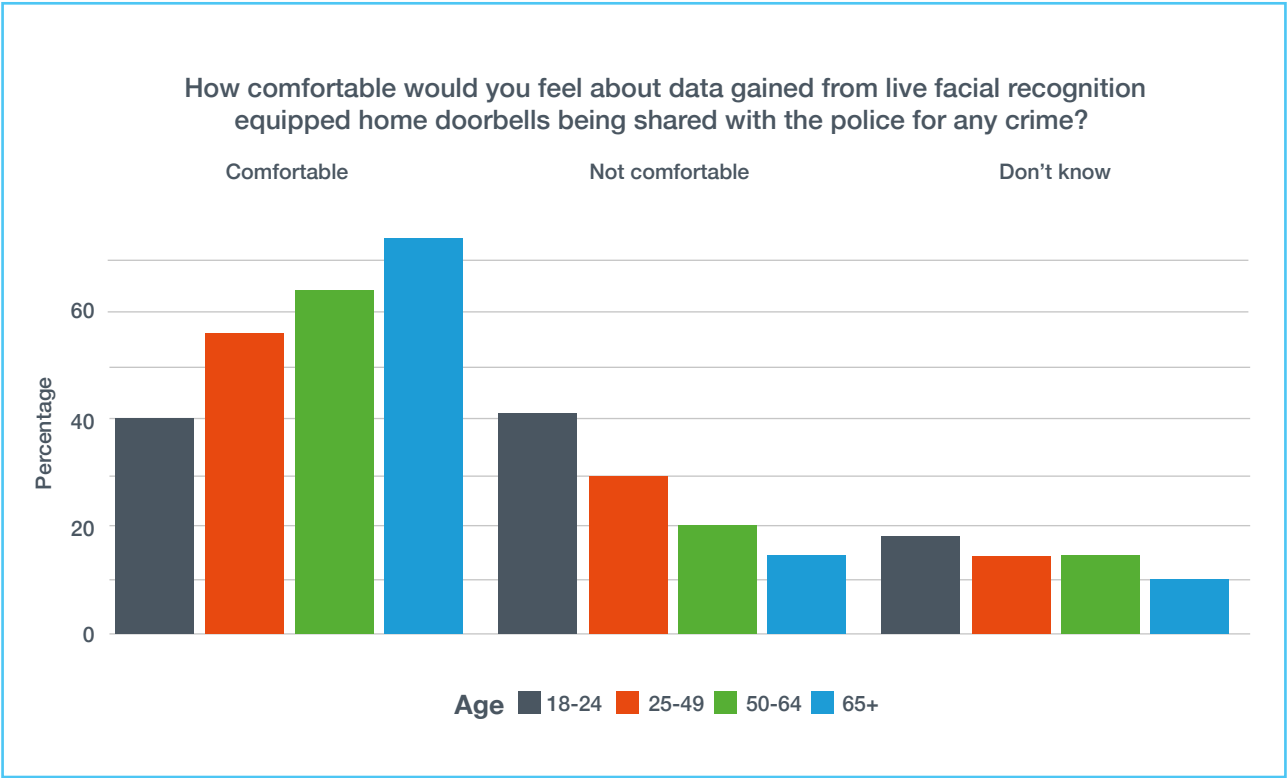
trust the police at all (30%). However the Home Office (2025) found that even among the eight% of respondents who indicated that police use of live facial recognition (LFR) is never acceptable, some of them agreed it could be justified for specific crimes such as murder, with 54% of these respondents agreeing that it could be used in such cases. Terrorist activity (52%) and sexual violence offences (49%) were also deemed as acceptable uses of LFR by most who initially stated that police use of LFR is never acceptable.

The influence of trust in the police with willingness to share footage from LFR equipped doorbells with them was most striking in the younger age group. Our results showed that willingness to

share footage was influenced by age, with younger people feeling less comfortable with hypothetically sharing footage with the police than those in older age groups.

Research from the world values survey indicates that Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) reports dramatically lower confidence in the police compared to older generations. Even after controlling for other factors, including the tendency

**Figure 15: Comfort with sharing data from live facial recognition equipped doorbells with the police by age (source, YouGov)**



for younger people to express lower confidence in the police, Gen Z exhibits significantly lower levels of trust than previous generations at the same age (UK in the World Values Survey, 2024). Therefore, the decreased comfort in potentially sharing footage from LFR-equipped doorbells with the police could be linked to this wider lack of comfort.

The lesson for digital citizen evidence is clear. The existence of a technical capability is not sufficient justification for its use. The more intrusive the capability, the clearer the policing purpose, legal basis, safeguards and oversight must be. Automated search and facial recognition should therefore be assessed against the full governance framework: legitimacy, privacy, accessibility, accountability, evidential integrity, human oversight, interoperability and managed demand.



# 9. TOWARDS AN IDEAL CITIZEN JOURNEY

Implicit in the concept of digital citizen evidence is the idea of the digital citizen. Ribble (2015) defines a digital citizen as someone who uses digital technologies regularly, while more recent work emphasises responsible use grounded in civic action, community care and considered judgement (Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Webster, 2025). In the context of citizen-initiated surveillance, responsible digital citizenship therefore requires balancing the right to safety with the right to privacy and sharing digital evidence with police in ways that are proportionate, ethical and respectful of the rights and wellbeing of others.

Evidence from interviews, force surveys and academic literature suggests that effective use of digital citizen evidence depends on aligning police processes with public expectations, and ensuring those processes reflect and encourage responsible use by all parties.

From the citizen perspective, good practice includes:

- Clear guidance on what constitutes useful evidence
- Transparency about thresholds, likely outcomes and timescales
- A simple route for submission
- Timely acknowledgement
- Proportionate feedback after submission

The self-administered interview literature shows that good evidence can be gained effectively from members of the public where clear guidance is given and questions are asked in the right way (Gabbert et al., 2009).

From the policing perspective, best practice involves:

- Proportionate triage
- Consistent evidential standards
- Secure upload and storage

- Integration with investigative workflows
- Communication that manages expectations

Research indicates that feedback itself, independent of outcome, can substantially increase future engagement. One police force reported that introducing structured feedback to frequent road-crime submitters increased reports from several hundred to over 2,000 annually (Wells and Amietta, 2024). Feedback therefore serves both an operational function, improving submission quality and reducing wasted effort, and a legitimacy function, by demonstrating procedural fairness and closing the loop with the public.

Crucially, digital submission systems should not shift investigative responsibility onto victims. Scholars warn that technologically mediated reporting risks privileging citizens with the resources and emotional capacity to provide system-optimised evidence, disadvantaging vulnerable groups and undermining procedural justice (Wells et al., 2023). Trauma-informed approaches are particularly important in offences such as domestic abuse, where evidence gathering may retraumatise victims if not handled carefully (Harris and Woodlock, 2019; Tanczer, 2023).

A practical ideal citizen journey therefore balances simplicity for the public with safeguards for legitimacy and proportionality. In practice, this means:

- Giving citizens a clear route to submit evidence
- Ensuring early triage so investigators are not overwhelmed by volume
- Preserving evidential integrity from source to court
- Providing acknowledgement and proportionate feedback so submitters are not “firing into the void”

- Ensuring the process remains supportive rather than responsibilising, particularly for vulnerable victims
- Using automation to support professional judgement, not replace it
- Ensuring consistent standards across forces so public participation does not depend on postcode, platform or supplier.

Moreover, police must be enabled to make the best use of the data they receive. Even where members of the public submit strong material, police value depends on the ability to review, triage, interpret and progress it efficiently within investigative and criminal justice workflows. The risk is not only that evidence is missed, but that backlogs and inconsistent responses create harms to trust and confidence.

**Figure 16: The ideal citizen evidence journey**



# 10. CONCLUSION

This research has shown that digital citizen evidence is not a rupture in British policing, but rather it is a technologically mediated continuation of one of its foundational principles: that public safety depends on cooperation between the police and the public.

The public are already generating digital evidence. They are recording incidents on smart doorbells, journey cameras, mobile phones and connected devices. They are sharing footage with police, insurers, neighbourhood groups and online platforms. In many cases, they do so because they want reassurance, agency and accountability; they want to feel that what has happened to them matters and there will be some sort of redress.

This presents policing with a major opportunity. Digital citizen evidence can help investigations, support safeguarding, improve prevention and renew public participation. It can allow police to access information they would otherwise never see. It can strengthen the connection between police and public at a time when visible policing has declined and public confidence is fragile. However, if evidence is submitted and ignored, trust may be damaged. If victims are expected to gather and package evidence without support, participation becomes responsabilisation. If systems exclude those without digital skills, the benefits of digital evidence will not be equally shared. If footage is collected or shared without regard to privacy, proportionality or due process, legitimacy will be undermined. If evidence cannot be verified, preserved or moved through systems, it will remain information rather than evidence.

Our research showed that citizen-initiated surveillance devices do make those that use them feel safer. Reducing fear of crime is an important benefit, not least because communities that feel safer are likely to be more cohesive and have more trust in the police. The Cheshire Neighbourhood watch example showed that smart doorbells are effective in improving the confidence and wellbeing of vulnerable groups in particular, such as domestic abuse victims. Moreover, ensuring these smart doorbells were properly fitted by experts who educated users on responsible use ensured

safety gains were not at the expense of the privacy of others.

However, more research is needed to determine whether smart doorbell cameras and journey cams actually work as a deterrent before they can be recommended more widely as a crime prevention approach. While the evidence is stronger on journey cams, what evidence there is on smart doorbells, such as the study from Almere in Holland, suggests that they are not as effective as first thought, or else they may only work for opportunistic thefts, such as porch pirates, but not for more determined criminals. Furthermore, questions still remain about the chilling effects of mass surveillance, and the security of data, not least because many of these devices are marketed by companies that place the burden of privacy and security squarely on the consumer.

The public want to submit digital evidence to the police. The challenge for policing is to respond to this desire by building the systems, standards, safeguards and relationships needed to make that participation effective, ethical and legitimate. This may include working with Neighbourhood Watch to offer education on responsible use before someone can purchase a smart doorbell, or else recommending models that have internal storage rather than cloud subscriptions, and come with privacy features such as shutters, such as is being explored by the Smart Doorbell Consortium, so that the public are better supported to align themselves with current regulations.

Several interviewees from the police service expressed concern that opening a new channel to allow members of the public to submit footage proactively would merely create more demand that they would be unable to meet. This risk-aversion is common and understandable, yet it has been repeatedly shown that this type of thinking commonly holds police back from early adoption of new technologies, leaving them struggling to effectively exploit new opportunities for preventing, detecting and disrupting crime. Expectation management, good systems and sound processes are key, and this paper highlights many examples of these. With proper triage and open and transparent communication with the public about

what good evidence looks like, we can mitigate the risk of opening the floodgates to a tidal wave of poor-quality information.

If properly governed, digital citizen evidence can form part of a virtuous circle: citizens submit useful evidence; police respond clearly and proportionately; feedback improves future submissions; evidence quality improves; public confidence is strengthened; and the relationship between police and public is renewed. Without that governance, digital citizen evidence risks becoming another source of frustration, inequality and unmet demand.

For nearly two centuries, British policing has rested on the idea that the police are the public, and the public are the police. Digital citizen evidence updates it for a digital age. To properly embrace this change policing needs to ask itself questions that relate to its very model – what one of our workshop participants called the “you call we come” model of policing – and instead move towards one in which technology enables the public to more effectively co-produce public safety.

The challenge for policing, as one of our workshop participants explained, is “to find a way of exploiting the opportunity without panicking, without allowing the possibility of risk and without allowing that kind of inherent risk aversion that exists in policing to push it into missing the opportunity completely”. The solution may be easier than police forces think – much of the technology is already there with more developing all the time and the returns on investment in reduced crime and increased public confidence could be significant.

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Establish a National Framework for Digital Citizen Evidence**

Digital citizen evidence should become a recognised and governed part of the policing landscape rather than a series of local or technology-led initiatives.

By September 2027, the Home Office, National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) and College of Policing should publish a National Framework for Digital Citizen Evidence, establishing common principles, terminology, governance arrangements and responsibilities across policing and criminal justice partners.

The framework should provide a consistent approach to submission, handling, accessibility, safeguarding, feedback, evidential integrity and the use of automation. It should also provide a foundation for future policy, procurement and regulatory decisions.

### **Recommendation 2: Place Public Trust, Feedback and Transparency at the Centre of System Design**

By September 2027, the NPCC and College of Policing should establish national minimum standards for communication and feedback relating to digital citizen evidence, with forces expected to demonstrate alignment by September 2028. Development of these standards should be informed by ongoing engagement with stakeholders through mechanisms such as working groups, user forums and scrutiny panels.

The standards should require acknowledgement of submissions, proportionate feedback, and greater transparency about evidential thresholds, decision-making and outcomes. They should also support clear communication about likely outcomes and the circumstances in which no further action will be taken.

Police forces should ensure that officers and staff responsible for reviewing digital citizen evidence receive appropriate training, including an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of those most likely to use these systems.

Because digital citizen evidence is voluntary, public confidence should be recognised as a strategic asset. Effective public safety is co-produced between police and communities. Every submission represents an act of cooperation and trust that should be acknowledged accordingly.

### **Recommendation 3: Support Responsible Digital Citizenship**

Digital citizenship should be understood as part of contemporary citizenship, balancing the right to safety with the rights, privacy and wellbeing of others. Existing and emerging technologies can help policing manage demand and improve the quality of citizen-submitted evidence, but informed and responsible public participation remains essential.

By September 2027, the College of Policing, NPCC and the Information Commissioner’s Office should publish national guidance on responsible digital citizenship and evidence sharing.

The guidance should address privacy, proportionality, social media sharing, citizen-

operated surveillance technologies and the risks associated with vigilantism. It should help citizens understand how evidence can be shared ethically, lawfully and in ways that maximise public value.

The guidance should be disseminated through trusted networks such as the Road Crime Reporters Network, Neighbourhood Watch and the British Horse Society. Police forces should also identify Digital Citizen Evidence Champions to support public understanding of the ethical and responsible use of citizen-initiated surveillance technologies.

#### **Recommendation 4: Leverage Existing Technology and Good Practice to Build Accessible, Scalable and Accountable Systems**

By September 2027, the Home Office, NPCC, the National Roads Policing Coordination Centre, Police AI and policing technology partners should develop a nationally coordinated, locally delivered model for managing digital citizen evidence, drawing on lessons from Operation Snap and other established citizen evidence initiatives.

Roads policing should act as a pathfinder for wider policing, helping to test and refine approaches to submission, triage, case progression, interoperability and the responsible use of automation. The model should combine local reporting and public engagement with shared capabilities for triage, case management and workflow processing, reducing duplication and inconsistency across forces.

The national model should establish minimum operational standards, promote effective practice, and support the timely identification and progression of high-harm and time-critical offences. Automation and AI should assist review and triage, but accountability and decision-making should remain human-led. This would enable policing to build a scalable national capability for managing digital citizen evidence while maintaining public trust, procedural fairness and evidential integrity.

#### **Recommendation 5: Establish a Long-Term Evidence and Evaluation Programme**

By September 2027, the Home Office, College of Policing, NPCC, the Police Foundation and academic partners should establish a national programme of research and evaluation on digital citizen evidence.

The programme should begin by establishing a national baseline of force performance, capability and existing practice, identifying examples

of effective delivery and opportunities for improvement.

It should assess how digital citizen evidence contributes to crime prevention, deterrence, investigation, safeguarding, procedural justice and public confidence. Particular attention should be paid to emerging technologies, including AI-assisted review, automated triage, smart doorbells and connected camera systems, where evidence of effectiveness remains limited.

The programme should support annual reporting on the effectiveness, fairness, accessibility and public value of digital citizen evidence systems, helping to inform future policy, investment and operational decisions. Evaluation should explicitly consider the relationship between public safety benefits, privacy, surveillance and community cohesion.

#### **Recommendation 6: Embed Privacy and Ethics in Citizen Evidence Technologies**

By September 2028, the Home Office and the Information Commissioner's Office should work with manufacturers and providers of smart doorbells, dashcams and other citizen evidence technologies to develop and promote industry standards for privacy-preserving and responsible design.

The standards should promote privacy-by-design, transparency, secure storage, proportionate data retention and responsible evidence sharing. They should also encourage features that reduce unnecessary surveillance of neighbours, passers-by and public spaces while supporting the lawful preservation and sharing of footage for evidential purposes.

This would help ensure that technologies intended to support public safety are designed in ways that protect privacy, maintain public trust and maximise public value.

#### **Recommendation 7: Promote Responsible Use of Citizen Evidence Technologies**

By September 2027, the Home Office and police forces should launch a national public information campaign encouraging the responsible adoption of citizen evidence technologies and explaining when their use may be appropriate. The campaign should make clear that individuals who choose to expose valuable property to foreseeable risks, such as receiving expensive deliveries when no one is home, should consider reasonable security measures that may deter offending or help identify offenders.

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# APPENDIX 1: ALIGNMENT OF RECOMMENDATIONS WITH THE PRINCIPLES FOR DIGITAL CITIZEN EVIDENCE

| Principle                                                      | Key recommendations | How the recommendations support the principle                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Legitimacy, Participation and Policing by Consent</b>    | R2, R3, R4, R7      | Promotes responsible public participation while ensuring responsibility for policing remains with police and criminal justice agencies.                                                                    |
| <b>2. Agency, Reassurance and Empowerment</b>                  | R2, R5              | Improves transparency, communication and feedback while evaluating whether digital citizen evidence delivers measurable public value.                                                                      |
| <b>3. Privacy and Proportionality</b>                          | R3, R5, R6          | Encourages ethical evidence sharing, evaluates the impacts of citizen-initiated surveillance, and promotes privacy-preserving technology design.                                                           |
| <b>4. Accessibility and Inclusion</b>                          | R1, R4              | Establishes accessibility as a national expectation and embeds inclusive design within future citizen evidence systems.                                                                                    |
| <b>5. Accountability, Feedback and Procedural Fairness</b>     | R1, R2              | Introduces national expectations for governance, communication, acknowledgement and proportionate feedback.                                                                                                |
| <b>6. Evidential Integrity and Quality</b>                     | R1, R3, R4          | Establishes common evidential standards, improves the quality of submitted evidence and supports consistent case-handling practices.                                                                       |
| <b>7. Triage, Human Oversight and Automation</b>               | R4, R5              | Supports the responsible use of automation and AI while ensuring decisions remain human-led and subject to evaluation.                                                                                     |
| <b>8. Interoperability, Consistency and National Standards</b> | R1, R4              | Creates national governance arrangements and promotes interoperable systems and nationally coordinated approaches.                                                                                         |
| <b>9. Managed Demand and Public Expectations</b>               | R2, R3, R4, R7      | Improves transparency around thresholds and outcomes, supports responsible participation, and enables more effective demand management.                                                                    |
| <b>10. Effectiveness and Public Value</b>                      | R4, R5, R7          | Promotes the identification and dissemination of effective practice, prioritises interventions with the greatest public safety benefits, and evaluates whether digital citizen evidence improves outcomes. |

Collectively, the recommendations translate the 10 principles into a coherent programme of governance, public engagement, operational delivery, evaluation and technological development. While individual

recommendations support multiple principles, each principle is addressed by at least one specific recommendation, ensuring that the framework is both comprehensive and actionable.

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