



Ethics Think Tank

Annual Update — April 2025 to March 2026

Independent, community led advice to Thames Valley Police





A message from the chair – Mark Sheehan

I am a Professor of Bioethics at the Ethox Centre in the Nuffield Department of Population Health at the University of Oxford. I am also Ethics Fellow and Group Lead for the Ethics Hub of the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre and Director of Graduate Studies for the Department.

I have a PhD in Philosophy from the City University of New York where I concentrated on Ethics and Philosophy of Language. My research over the past 25 years has been across the full range of areas of applied ethics and bioethics, with a more recent concentration on ethics and governance institutions in society. This has led to an interest in issues of trust and legitimacy as well as the role of deliberative methods and public involvement in decision-making processes.





A message from the chair – Mark Sheehan

About 5 years ago, Detective Superintendent Lewis Prescott-Mayling, Dr Time Lowe and I established the Thames Valley Police Data Ethics Committee which I chaired. This Committee represented an entirely new way of thinking about the ethical acceptability of data use by the police: it drew a very broad range of members of the community – precisely those communities whose data is being used and who stand to be most affected by these uses. It adopted a model of consultation which draws heavily on deliberative democratic and participatory methods which I think fits very well with how the Ethics Think Tank might develop its place in the Thames Valley and as an example of good practice in the UK and beyond.





A message from the chair – Mark Sheehan

I have experience on national and international policy and decision-making committees which provide an important link between academic work and policy impact. I have long-standing experience as a member of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence's (NICE) Highly Specialised Technology Evaluation Committee and both local and regional NHS commissioning committees. I have established links with the national governing body for health research, the Health Research Authority (HRA) as a member of the Health Research Authority's National Research Ethics Advisors Panel and was a member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Party on research in children.





Message from the Senior Sponsor – Detective Superintendent Lewis Prescott- Mayling

Building and maintaining public trust and confidence requires more than effective policing. It relies on people having confidence that decisions are made fairly, transparently and with proper consideration of the impact they may have on individuals, communities and wider society. As policing continues to evolve, we face increasingly complex questions where there may be competing rights, interests, risks and public expectations. The Ethics Think Tank provides an important opportunity for Thames Valley Police (TVP) and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) to explore those issues through independent challenge, expert insight and informed discussion.

The Think Tank brings together a diverse range of academics, practitioners and subject matter experts to consider issues that may affect police legitimacy, public confidence and the communities we serve. It creates a valuable space to explore ethical dilemmas, emerging risks and complex policy questions from different perspectives, helping decision-makers to better understand both the intended and unintended consequences of decisions. Whilst the Think Tank does not make operational decisions or determine policy, its discussions help ensure that ethical considerations remain an important part of decision-making.



Message from the Senior Sponsor – Detective Superintendent Lewis Prescott- Mayling

During its first year, the Think Tank has examined a broad range of themes reflecting both contemporary policing challenges and wider societal change. These discussions have explored the ethical implications of emerging technology, the balance between individual rights and public safety, transparency and accountability in decision-making, equality and inclusion, environmental responsibility, and the ways in which policing can maintain legitimacy in an increasingly complex landscape. The breadth of these conversations demonstrates the value of bringing together individuals with different experiences, expertise and viewpoints to consider issues that rarely have straightforward solutions.



Message from the Senior Sponsor – Detective Superintendent Lewis Prescott- Mayling

The group's work aligns closely with Thames Valley Police's wider commitment to fairness, transparency, accountability and public involvement in policing. Through open discussion and constructive challenge, the Think Tank helps strengthen our understanding of issues that matter to our communities and supports our ambition to be an excellent police force trusted by all.

I would like to thank Professor Mark Sheehan and all members of the Think Tank for their commitment, expertise and willingness to contribute their time and knowledge. Their independent perspectives have helped shape thoughtful discussion on some of the most challenging issues facing modern policing and have established strong foundations for the future development of the Ethics Think Tank.



About the Think Tank

The Think Tank is a joint TVP and OPCC Ethics Group that was agreed to be established through the Scrutiny Review Findings in February 2024, which serves as a guiding document to ensure clarity and alignment in the activities, roles, and responsibilities of stakeholders.

The purpose of the Ethics Think Tank is for TVP and the OPCC to collaborate with experts on areas of importance to the police service, for strategic discussion and decision making on legitimacy issues and concerns. Through collaboration and the exchange of personal and professional knowledge and expertise, the group will offer support and advice on problems, potential future risks and ethical dilemmas that face the entire Thames Valley area.





About the Think Tank

The Think Tank comprises a diverse group of independent members, including individuals with lived experience, community representatives, academics and subject matter experts. This diversity is central to the groups' ability to provide balanced and informed scrutiny.

Whilst some of the group members have come from the data ethics focused group, it is now a flexible group that is able to consider and advise on a range of ethical challenges in Policing.





Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the Joint TVP/OPCC Ethics Think Tank are:

- To consider, advise on, and where appropriate challenge, the interpretation and application of legal, regulatory, or policy requirements relating to legitimacy in policing.
- To review and provide advice on cases, issues, or activities relevant to policing with significant, novel, or wide-ranging ethical implications.
- Highlight any significant risks and opportunities and share examples of good practice.
- Share knowledge and provide guidance on how questions about legitimacy in policing impacts partnerships and organisational development.
- Advise on contemporary policing issues and matters of emerging interest to policing.



Terms of reference

The Ethics Think Tank will consider existing or emerging ethical, social and practical issues arising in the context of policing, understood here to be issues of 'legitimacy in policing' where this is taken to include the following dimensions:

- **Legal:** Compliance with statutory, regulatory or policy requirements.
- **Ethical:** Alignment with or in relation to societal, organisational and personal values.
- **Political:** Accountability, transparency, and democratic/public engagement.
- **Technical:** Demonstrated expertise, competence, and professionalism.
- **Environmental:** Responsible environmental practice and performance.
- **Economic:** Effective and responsible management of financial resources.
- **Social:** Conduct that reflects and sustains public acceptance and support.



Meetings and Membership



Meetings

Number of meetings held: 6

Average attendance: High
(consistently above 80%)

Police representation: Assistant Chief Constable for Legitimacy and Public Value, Senior leads for Thames Valley Police and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, a legitimacy analyst, subject matter experts and administrative support.





Meetings – Diversity Summary

The Chair is a Professor of Bioethics at the Big Data Institute, an Ethicist and Philosopher. Other member's backgrounds include:

- Representative from the Deaf Community and British Sign Language Advisory Board
- Criminal Law Barrister
- Academic – developing and teaching Policing Programs
- Academic at Ethox Centre – University of Oxford in Applied Ethics
- Professor of Global Policing at the University College of London
- An Ethics and Risk Management Specialist
- Chief Executive of Reducing the Risk Charity
- Executive Coach and Leadership speaker.





Meetings – Other Attendees

- Sign Language Interpreters.

The Think Tank reflects a broad range of backgrounds, including different ethnicities, ages, genders, disability and professional experiences. The members are also across different geographic areas. This diversity supports robust and representative scrutiny.

Identified gaps:

- Criminal Law – the existing member representative has stepped down, and support has been provided to secure a replacement contact. It was recognised that, while the group does not provide legal advice, access to legal expertise remains important given the potential overlap between legal and ethical issues considered by the group.
- TVP Legitimacy Analyst – the departure of the TVP Legitimacy Analyst has created challenges relating to the administration and coordination of group activities



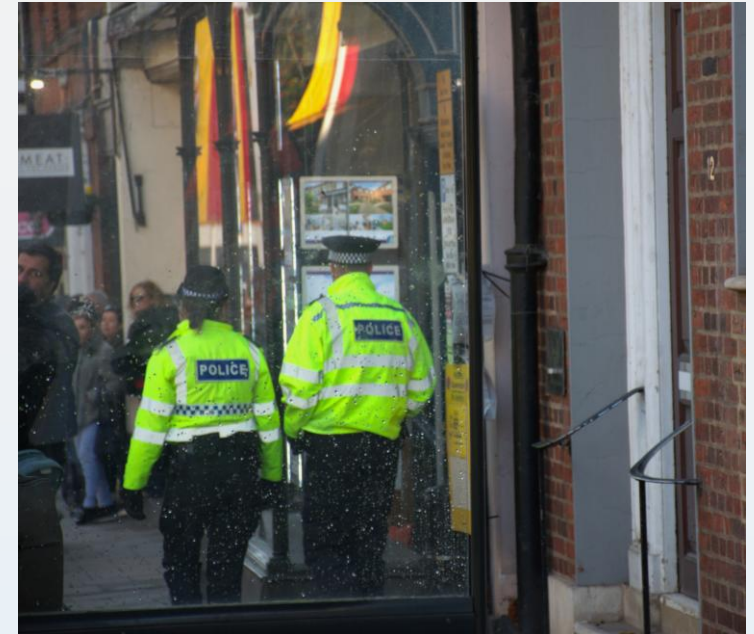


What we focused on



What we focused on

During 2025–26, the Ethics Think Tank considered a range of ethical questions relating to policing practice, emerging risks, organisational legitimacy and public confidence. The themes below summarise the issues discussed and the key questions explored.





Theme one – Live Facial Recognition

Key Ethical Question Explored: How can Live Facial Recognition be used in an ethically appropriate manner, ensuring that its use is proportionate, transparent and accountable, while balancing public safety benefits with consideration of privacy, individual rights and public confidence in policing?





Theme one - Live Facial Recognition

- Using advanced technologies to enhance public safety, manage risk, reduce and solve crime whilst improving the efficiency of our operations.
- The implementation of Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) aligns with our strategic plan to provide a safer community for all residents and visitors of our forces. TVP and Hampshire Isle of Wight Constabulary is committed to maintaining the highest standards of transparency in the deployment of FRT, ensuring it is used responsibly, proportionately and always in the public interest.
- Develop strategies for engaging with diverse communities regarding the use of facial recognition technology.
- Ensure public awareness and understanding of the technology and its applications.



Theme one – Follow up discussion

- Accuracy and bias: LFR was described as highly accurate with no statistically significant bias; discussion emphasised the importance of careful language when communicating this to the public.
- Transparency and public trust: deployments are overt, signed, published in advance, and include on-site engagement. Public reassurance was considered as important as operational outcomes.

Ethical dimensions explored included:

- Proportionality and seriousness of offences;
- Inclusion/exclusion of under-18s;
- Geography and recency of offences;
- Analogue versus digital facial recognition (human spotters versus automated systems)
- Potential future developments were shared as conceptual only, including intelligence-led watchlists, condition-of-entry uses at events, and integration with wider data sources.



Theme one – Discussion outcomes

- Strong interest in the Think Tank producing an ethics-based commentary or position paper on current LFR use in TVP.
- Agreement that communication and narrative framing are crucial to maintaining public confidence.
- Suggestions included clearer plain-English comms, visible contact routes, use of short videos, and involvement of non-police ambassadors and community groups.



Theme two – Ethics and Environmental Sustainability

Key Ethical Question Explored: What ethical responsibilities does policing have in relation to environmental sustainability and how should environmental considerations be balanced against operational effectiveness, public safety and organisational priorities?

- To highlight the relationship between policing and environmental sustainability.
- There are ethical trade-offs between environmental sustainability impacts on our community and policing aims vs the impact of our policing aims on environmental sustainability.
- Environmental sustainability covers local, national and global impacts on air, water, land, resources, flora and fauna, urban environment and public health.
- Presentation delivered to Think Tank using indicative scenarios like transitioning from diesel to electric vehicles (climate change).



Theme two – Discussion outcome

Members agreed that environmental sustainability is an increasingly important ethical consideration for policing and should be incorporated into future organisational planning and decision-making where appropriate.





Theme three – Police impartiality at Pride Events (Lanyards)

Key Ethical Question Explored:
How should policing balance impartiality, inclusion and individual expression, and what role do visible symbols of support play in building trust, confidence and a sense of belonging for different communities?





Theme three – Police Impartiality at Pride Events

- Discussions following a High Court ruling specific to the 2024 Pride Event.
- LGBTQIA+ officers wore rainbow-branded lanyards to signal their role and training.
- Following the ruling all rainbow-branded items were removed across TVP.
- Discussion if this led to a loss of visibility and a feeling of safety and inclusion.
- Consideration of a re-branding exercise, legal advice and recognising the importance of allyship.
- A summary document to be drafted based on the Think Tank conversations on impartiality at Pride events and wearing of the LGBT lanyards. This will include ethical reasoning, community impact and practical suggestions.



Theme four – Information overload

Key Ethical Question Explored: What ethical and operational risks arise from information overload in policing, and what responsibilities does the organisation have to support effective decision-making, wellbeing and public safety?

- Increased quantities of digital information. Officers must continuously process high-volume, high-stakes inputs across multiple channels. This cognitive overload is known to impair decision-making, attention and information recall.
- Understanding the scope of the issue in policing is essential before recommending solutions.
- Policing is particularly vulnerable as errors carry significant operational and public-safety risk. They must also act with limited time and with complex multitasking.



Theme four – Information overload

Suggested avenues of inquiry included:

- Volume and type of internal communications
- Role-based exposure to information load
- Links between information overload and wellbeing or performance
- Potential data sources: email traffic, internal bulletins, workforce surveys, sickness absence data.

Discussion points:

- Differentiating information overload from general workload or organisational stress is complex but important.
- Technology may mitigate overload in some contexts but can also exacerbate it.
- The topic was widely seen as ethically relevant but requires clearer framing and evidence to progress.



Theme five – Recording of Ethnicity Information

Key Ethical Question Explored: How can ethnicity information be collected, used and communicated in a way that supports legitimacy, accountability and public confidence whilst reducing the risk of misunderstanding, misuse or unintended harm?

Consideration TVP's work on improving the recording and use of ethnicity data across policing activities.

Purpose of ethnicity recording:

- Supports accountability, transparency, legitimacy and scrutiny.
- Required under the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty
- Forms part of TVP's Trust and Confidence Strategy



Theme five – Current challenges

- Ethnicity is currently self-defined in around 55% of victim records and 60% of suspect/offender records.
- Data quality and consistency vary across crime types.
- Competing operational priorities limit focus and resources

National Protected Characteristics Dataset:

- Forthcoming national standard (21 categories plus “prefer not to say”)
- Intended to improve consistency across forces.
- Uncertainty around whether this will increase or reduce completion rates.

Key questions raised:

- Should ethnicity be recorded for all crimes (consensus: yes, for consistency)
- How and when data should be used and published
- At what point data is considered reliable enough for decision-making
- Risks of misinterpretation or misuse of published data



Theme five – Debate themes

- Importance of self-defined ethnicity over officer-defined categories
- Risk of reinforcing racialised assumptions if data is poorly interpreted.
- Balance between transparency and potential community harm
- Need for clear explanations (“the why”) when asking individuals for ethnicity.
- Recognising discomfort for staff asking sensitive questions during traumatic incidents
- Learning from behavioural science and procedural justice to improve wording and approach.



Theme five – Conclusion

There was broad agreement that ethnicity recording is necessary, but should be:

- Clearly explained
- Requested consistently
- Analysed carefully
- Used for meaningful operational and strategic purposes, not simply compliance.
- Improving how questions are asked (language, context, timing) is as important as improving systems.



Theme six – The Use of Powers Legitimacy Framework

Key Ethical Question Explored: How can Thames Valley Police assess disproportionality in a fair, transparent and evidence-based way which supports both organisational learning and public accountability?

The Use of Powers Legitimacy framework is designed to help TVP analyse ethnicity-related disproportionate outcomes in stop and search using data more responsibly and systematically. Key points were as follows.

Aim of the framework

- To assess when disproportionality reflects unfairness (“disparity”) versus contextual factors.
- To guide more targeted scrutiny and decision-making



Theme six – The Use of Powers Legitimacy Framework

Framework structure

- Uses multiple indicators (disproportionality ratios, influence scores, significance tests)
- Applies risk scoring to highlight areas requiring deeper examination.
- Supports an “explain and reform” approach rather than a binary decision.

Strengths

- Moves beyond headline disproportionality figures.
- Helps avoid misleading conclusions in low-volume or demographically skewed areas.
- Encourages iterative analysis and questioning.



Theme six – Discussion themes

Key discussion themes

- Risk of feedback loops (searching where intelligence already exists reinforces patterns)
- The legitimacy of underlying data itself, including officer-defined ethnicity substitutions.
- The need to interpret results within broader social and geographic contexts.
- Importance of acknowledging data limitations openly

Value to the organisation

- Framework helps focus limited scrutiny resources.
- Supports defensible explanations while highlighting areas requiring change.



Theme six – Conclusions

- The framework was welcomed as a significant step forward in ethical data analysis.
- Members emphasised:
- The need to continue refining it as a “living” tool.
- Ensuring it informs both internal learning and external assurance.
- Avoiding simplistic conclusions based solely on statistical outputs.







Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Live Facial Recognition	The Think Tank will provide a considered written review on whether current Live Facial Recognition is justified, proportionate and ethically robust. TVP comms team to engage with Office for Police and Crime Commissioner regarding clearer public facing materials (e.g. short videos, plain English summaries).	Feedback informed ongoing governance discussions relating to Live Facial Recognition, including consideration of public engagement, transparency and future communication approaches.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Ethics and Environmental sustainability.	Verbal advice on how to approach these challenges and their impact to prioritise the competing demands.	Raised awareness of environmental sustainability as a legitimate ethical consideration within policing and identified opportunities for future discussion and organisational learning.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Police Impartiality at Pride Events – Lanyards.	The group expressed a generally supportive stance on the wearing of LGBT lanyards, recognising them as a visible symbol of inclusion and allyship within the workplace. Key points raised included: • Voluntary Participation: It was agreed that wearing the lanyard should remain a personal choice, not a mandatory requirement.	Ethical considerations were captured within an outcome paper to support wider organisational discussion and consideration by Chief Officer teams.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Police Impartiality at Pride Events – Lanyards.	• Positive Representation: Many felt that the lanyards help foster a more welcoming and inclusive environment, particularly for LGBT+ colleagues and members of the public. • Respect for Individual Beliefs: The group acknowledged that while the lanyards promote inclusivity, it's important to respect differing personal views and ensure no one feels pressured to wear one.	Ethical considerations were captured within an outcome paper to support wider organisational discussion and consideration by Chief Officer teams.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Police Impartiality at Pride Events – Lanyards.	• Visibility and Impact: Some members highlighted the positive impact of visible support, especially in public-facing roles, where it can signal safety and acceptance. Overall, the group supported the continued availability of LGBT lanyards and encouraged respectful dialogue around their use.	Ethical considerations were captured within an outcome paper to support wider organisational discussion and consideration by Chief Officer teams.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Information overload.	Suggested avenues of inquiry included: - Volume and type of internal communications - Role-based exposure to information load - Links between information overload and wellbeing or performance - Potential data sources: email traffic, internal bulletins, workforce surveys, sickness absence data. Feedback was that the topic was widely seen as ethically relevant but requires clearer framing and evidence to progress.	Shaped future research considerations by identifying potential lines of inquiry and highlighting the need for a clearer evidence base.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
Recording of Ethnicity.	There was broad agreement that ethnicity recording is necessary, but must be: • Clearly explained • Requested consistently • Analysed carefully • Used for meaningful operational and strategic purposes, not simply compliance. Improving how questions are asked (language, context, timing) is as important as improving systems.	Discussion informed ongoing consideration of how ethnicity information is collected, explained and used within organisational policy and governance processes.



Discussion outcomes and influence

Ethical issue considered	Key reflections	Influence
The legitimacy framework	The framework was welcomed as a significant step forward in ethical data analysis. Members emphasised: • The need to continue refining it as a “living” tool. • Ensuring it informs both internal learning and external assurance. • Avoiding simplistic conclusions based solely on statistical outputs	Feedback supported continued refinement of the Legitimacy Framework and its use in organisational learning, scrutiny and assurance activity.



Reflections on how the panel is working





How the panel is working

What worked well:

The Think Tank provides valuable challenge and perspective on complex ethical issues. Members reflected that discussions often reshape initial assumptions, which is seen as a strength.



How the panel is working

What we want to improve:

Members identified several opportunities to further strengthen the effectiveness, consistency and impact of the Think Tank:

- Ensuring ethical questions and discussion objectives are clearly defined at the outset to support focused and productive debate.
- Revisiting significant topics over multiple meetings to enable deeper consideration of evolving ethical issues and emerging themes.



How the panel is working

What we want to improve:

Developing a clearer framework for Think Tank outputs, including agreed principles relating to:

- written advice;
- ethical principles;
- recommendations; and
- public availability of outputs
- Establishing a more structured process for identifying, selecting and prioritising future ethical dilemmas and emerging challenges for discussion.
- Exploring how the impact and contribution of the Think Tank can be evaluated and evidenced as the group matures.



Areas of future focus



Areas of future focus

Members discussed opportunities to further develop the Think Tank's role, influence and contribution to ethical decision-making across the organisation.

- Consider adopting agreed criteria for the selection and prioritisation of ethical issues.
- Explore the use of smaller task-and-finish groups or thematic sub-groups between meetings to progress complex topics.
- Explore opportunities to establish formal links with TVP Ethics Champions and relevant departmental leads to strengthen organisational learning and support the identification of future ethical dilemma.



Areas of future focus

- Develop an approach for assessing the effectiveness and impact of the Think Tank.

Potential future topics for consideration include:

- Non-Crime Hate Incidents
- Recording of ethnicity within stop and search processes; and
- Revisiting the Live Facial recognition case paper.



How to get involved

Email: ThinkTank@thamesvalley.police.uk