

# **Digital ID cards: a versatile and useful tool or a worrying cybersecurity risk?**

**Robert Booth UK technology editor, The Guardian, 25/9/2025**

It is 21 years since Tony Blair's government made proposals for an ID card system to tackle illegal working and immigration, and to make it more convenient for the public to access services.

The same issues are on the agenda again as Keir Starmer revives what became one of New Labour's most controversial policies. He is about to find out if he can defeat the argument that David Cameron's Conservatives made before scrapping it. They said the ID card approach to personal privacy was "the worst of all worlds – intrusive, ineffective and enormously expensive".

Blair is an important figure in the latest push, through lobbying carried out by his Tony Blair Institute (TBI). The idea re-emerges in a different technological world in which smartphones are ubiquitous and much, but far from all, of the population is familiar with negotiating digital credentials.

Starmer appears ready to try again, and ministers believe there will be less public opposition, although digital ID cards could worsen the effect of digital exclusion. Age UK has estimated that about 1.7 million people over the age of 74 do not use the internet. TBI's arguments in favour are that far from reflecting the "papers, please" caricature, digital ID "brings fairness, control and convenience to people's everyday interactions with each other and with the state".

It can close loopholes exploited by trafficking gangs, reduce pull factors driving illegal migration to Britain, speed up citizens' interactions with government, reduce errors and identity fraud and boost trust as a tangible symbol of a more responsive and flexible state.

The arguments against often centre on privacy. Civil liberties campaigners fear any mandatory ID card system, even one intended to tackle illegal migration, would require the population to surrender vast amounts of personal data to be amassed in national databases.

They worry that the information could be amalgamated, searched and analysed to monitor, track and profile people. This would shift the balance of power towards the state "with dangerous implications for our security, rights and freedoms", campaigners such as Liberty and Big Brother Watch say.

Computer security experts also say centralised data could create a juicy target for hackers who, as the cyber-attacks on Jaguar Land Rover, the Co-op, the British Library and others have shown, pose a growing threat to the UK's ability to function. It should be possible to decentralise the data to reduce that risk, but the detail is yet to be spelt out.

Huge government and public digital projects also have a history of going awry in the UK. Blair's institute reckons it will cost £1bn to set up and £100m a year to run. It does not take a cynic to fear those costs could spiral. The Association of Digital Verification Providers has estimated that a full mandatory national ID system would cost more than £2bn.

Another version of a national ID card proposed by the Labour Together thinktank and referred to as the BritCard has been costed at between £140m and £400m with running costs of up to £10m a year. The government appears keen to try to keep the spending low. "This is not going to be a case of a gigantic, hundreds of millions of pounds contract issued to the likes of IBM or Fujitsu," said a source involved in the government's thinking. They said it could be built by the government's own digital services department using smaller contracts with UK firms.