

AESAC Meeting

11 October 2024

13:00-14:45

MS Teams

For Information

These documents are an accurate record of the meetings of the Committee, but some information has been summarised or redacted as it is sensitive and/or related to ongoing work.

Note of Meeting

1 Welcome, introductions and matters arising.

- 1.1 Chair welcomed all to the meeting and conducted a round of introductions.
- 1.2 A full list of attendees and apologies is available in Appendix A.
- 1.3 No declarations of interest were declared.
- 1.4 Co-Chair confirmed the agenda would be moved around to accommodate Policy team availability.

2 Policy progress update

- 2.1 A member of the Policy team reported that because of a meeting with the new Minister for Border Security and Asylum, policy advice has been prepared regarding scientific methods of age estimation and the exploratory work on age estimation technology, including facial age assessment. This advice has not been submitted yet. However, there is the potential that there will be more time to allow for exploration of effective age estimation methods.
- 2.2 A Policy representative provided an update on the status of policy work around facial age assessment (FAE). FAE policy is currently in evidence-led development. Once this stage of FAE testing has been completed and evaluated within the Home Office, AESAC will be updated accordingly.
- 2.3 Policy also stated that while machine learning is not currently directly related by scientific research to FAE, this may be explored with the AESAC in future, as a tool to support initial age decisions. No decisions have been made and it was reiterated that Policy would return to AESAC with updates.
- 2.4 A Policy representative continued that Policy are working with Ministers to gain direction on where AESAC can contribute to academic research. There are no live commissions.

ACTION: Policy to return to AESAC with updates on progress of facial age estimation research, a) its relationship to machine learning and b) potential opportunities for AESAC to contribute to academic research.

3 Facial Age Estimation (FAE) Update

- 3.1 An official from policy outlined the policy context regarding age estimation, including increasing pressures on the current age estimation system at border control.
- 3.2 A Policy officer reported that FAE and machine learning has improved over the last decade and has current uses in both the public and private sector, and subsequently is being researched as a potential method of age estimation of individuals at first encounter at the border or elsewhere in the system.
- 3.3 The focus is to provide processes that are less intrusive and will support the efficient and effective processing and support for those claiming to be unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 3.4 The Policy team said that internal Home Office research and testing will provide an improved understanding on whether FAE will be considered as a viable future tool for age assessment of individuals at the border or elsewhere in their immigration journey.
- 3.5 Policy officials, the HOB team and AESAC members discussed the current and future testing, and how and where FAE was intended to be integrated into age assessment. Policy highlighted that policy development is at a very early stage and no final decisions have been made about how and where the technology would be used. Officials emphasised that policy development was dependent on the testing, and that ethical considerations were being given full consideration.

ACTION: Policy/Home Office Biometrics colleagues to confirm whether FAE test scenarios process should be cleared by the Biometrics Forensics Ethics Group.

ACTION: Policy Officers to confirm with HO colleagues that the Data Protection Impact Assessment and Data Protection processes had been agreed in relation to FAE testing.

- 3.6 Policy officials, HOB team and AESAC members discussed the future direction of testing including statistics.
- 3.7 An AESAC member highlighted that there may not have been enough time for the committee to review all papers sent to them yet and requested further detail on the level of detail/involvement required from AESAC.

ACTION: Policy to provide clarity and specifics of how the committee should contribute and be involve in policy regarding facial age estimation.

ACTION: Home Office Biometrics team to provide data showing and presenting false negative and positive rates to be provided after testing.

4 International Engagement Update

- 4.1 A member of Policy reported that there were ongoing international discussions regarding FAE. Policy confirmed continued engagement with international counterparts and will continue to review what progress other countries have been making in this area.

- 4.2 Engagement with international officials and colleagues from a university hospital led to further scientific questions arising, which were subsequently circulated to AESAC.
- 4.3 A member of Policy reported that DNA methylation remained as an ongoing area of research regarding age estimation techniques in another European country.
- 4.4 A Policy representative reported on a visit with officials from another European country and confirmed that information would be sent about the meetings with both these international committees to the AESAC members.
- 4.5 Co-Chairs welcomed the Policy team passing through these documents for AESAC to review.

ACTION: Policy to send AESAC updates and questions from meetings with international government officials.

ACTION: Secretariat to liaise with policy to facilitate engagement with international government officials.

5 Minutes and Matters Arising

- 5.1 Chair asked for comments on the previous meeting minutes in July 2024. These outstanding actions from previous minutes were reviewed. The following updates were provided.
- 5.2 Action 3 – April 2024. Secretariat to update on progress of Terms of Reference (ToR) and Commissioning brief. ToR have been signed off by the Chief Scientific Adviser, but the document awaiting finalising after ministerial meeting. Once it has been approved it will be put on the webpage. **ACTION PENDING.**
- 5.3 Action 4- April 2024. Secretariat to provide a progress update on the meeting with BFEG. This is dependent on whether the committee feels they require BFEG's input on their technical expertise. **ACTION PENDING.**
- 5.4 Action 7- April 2024. Policy to consider providing time for the applicant to consider Merton assigned age assessment before commencing with scientific age assessment. Policy confirmed direction from Ministers is still pending and this will impact on this Action. **ACTION PENDING.**
- 5.5 Action 8 – April 2024. Policy to consider the ethics and risks of a scenario where applicants may be referred for scientific age assessment before the Merton assessment was completed. This is again linked to the above question and potential answer it does not relate to the FAE process but the previous Ministers priority for the use of x-rays and MRI determinates of age estimation. Awaiting ministers to give a clear direction. This action is awaiting direction from ministers. **ACTION PENDING.**
- 5.6 Action 1 – July 2024. Secretariat and Policy to provide an update on progress regarding the launch of the DNA methylation report for the next quarterly meeting. Report has been signed off and is awaiting a review. **ACTION PENDING.**
- 5.7 Action 2 – July 2024. Secretariat to confirm progress on AESAC in-person meeting. The next in-person meeting will be held in summer 2025. The previous one was cancelled due to the election. **ACTION PENDING.**

- 5.8 Action 3 – Members to be advised of the Ministerial portfolio lead when this is confirmed. Confirmed as Minister Eagle for now however there may be a crossover with other ministers' remit depending on what AESAC is requested to assist with going forward. ACTION CLOSED.
- 5.9 Action 4 – July 2024: Secretariat to work with TC to revise and update the draft introductory presentation. TC completed amendments to ministerial presentation. ACTION CLOSED.

6 Co-chairs' update

- 6.1 Co-Chair updated the committee on the presence of new administration and a new commissioning brief focus for the committee.
- 6.2 Chair is taking a temporary step back from chair duties due to health issues. A member of AESAC committee is assisting in co-chair duties.
- 6.3 An AESAC member reported that there is now a clear focus on FAE. Co-chairs had met with the new Minister for Border Security and Asylum. It was conveyed that the Minister had concerns regarding the use of X-Ray and MRI methods which were being explored under the previous Government. The use of FAE was indicated as a preferred priority for delivery although reference was made to DNA methylation, and it was agreed further research was needed before it could be considered a viable option.
- 6.4 The next meeting is on 30th January 2025. Co-chair thanked officers and members for attending.

7 Closing remarks and AOB

- 7.1 Secretariat raised that AESAC has been given a provisional invitation to present at the next international interdisciplinary Study Group on Forensic Age Diagnostics (AGFAD) in March 2025. This is likely of interest for Home Office colleagues because AGFAD is the main research group for international age estimation.
- 7.2 No further business reported.

Appendix A

Attendees: AESAC

Stuart Boyd (Co-Chair)
Tim Cole (Supporting Co-Chair)
Sally Andrews
Liam Way
Allison Ward
Tabitha Randell

Home Office Officials:

AESAC Secretary and Secretariat
Home Office Policy representatives
Home Office Biometrics Team

Apologies: AESAC

Lucina Hackman
Denise Syndercombe- Court