

MEPs reject fingerprinting of 6 year olds

The European Parliament's Justice and Civil Liberties Committee has backed a European Liberal Democrat amendment to set the minimum age of fingerprinting for EU passports at 12 years old rather than the European Commission's proposal of 6 years old.

The author of the amendment, **Baroness Sarah Ludford MEP, Liberal Democrat European Justice Spokeswoman**, commented:

"This is a sensible and precautionary position. Even aside from civil liberties objections of principle, there are many practical obstacles to the feasibility of using fingerprints of children from such an early age. That is why I argued for fixing on 12 initially while studies are done, and I am gratified that the committee has followed my advice and aligned with the European Parliament plenary position on EU visa fingerprinting.

"Fingerprints of young children change as they grow, and despite assertions about a 'juvenile growing process' to predict changes, there is a complete lack of empirical evidence about whether this really can ensure reliability of those fingerprints several years after capture. With the normal rule of five-year validity of passports and of stored visa data, this becomes more than an academic question.

"A failure to have all the mechanisms and safeguards in place would just mean turning the EU passports and visa schemes into vast biometric experiments, with severe implications for data accuracy, privacy protection and individual rights."

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Notes to Editors:

1. Sarah Ludford is currently in negotiation with the Council of ministers about handling of visa applications and collection of biometrics to make the Visa Information System agreed last year operational. In July the European Parliament backed her recommendation for an age of 12, with a 3-year study to examine the issue of fingerprinting children. The committee vote on passports is in line with that position.

2. The UK is not legally allowed to join either the EU passports or visa schemes as we choose not to be part of the Schengen zone, but the UK government tends to shadow EU developments and even lets it be thought that they are under an EU obligation. In fact UK decisions on fingerprinting for passports and visas are autonomous. Children from the age of 5 have been fingerprinted for several years for UK visas, but fingerprints are collected on every application, not stored. While this avoids the 'growth' problem, it must entail extra cost and inconvenience for all parties.