

Manchester launch for ID cards. 'Big Brother'

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Autor: editor

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Manchester will this autumn become the first city where people can sign up for an ID card, Jacqui Smith has said.

Anyone over 16 in the city with a UK passport will be able to apply for a card from the Home Office.

The home secretary's speech signals her determination to push ahead with the cards, which will initially cost £30, despite opposition.

The Tories and Lib Dems want the £5bn scheme scrapped, while some Labour MPs have expressed doubts about its cost.

People in Manchester who want an ID card can register their interest on the Directgov website.

They will then be told later in the year how to get their card, which will probably involve a visit to the Manchester passport office to be interviewed and have their fingerprints and photo taken.

The Conservatives claim the Cabinet is split on ID cards, with some ministers keen to scrap them to save money.

But the Home Office says it is determined to push ahead, claiming ID cards will reduce fraud - thus saving money - and are vital to combating terrorism and organised crime.

Giving fingerprints

The Manchester launch will mark the beginning of the main phase of the ID scheme which ministers say will culminate in cards being available nationwide by 2012.

At a series of meetings on Wednesday, Ms Smith said post offices and pharmacies could play an important role in the success of the ID scheme, allowing people to give their fingerprints and a face scan while "out doing the shopping".

ID CARD TIMETABLE

2009: Workers at Manchester and London City airport

Autumn 2009: Manchester pilot

2010: Students opening bank accounts offered ID cards

2011/12: All UK passport applicants

2015: 90% foreign nationals covered

2017: Full roll-out?

The cost of the cards will be capped at £30 for the first two years and then there will be an additional cost to the applicant of getting a card via a post office or High Street pharmacy.

This charge has yet to be decided, but the Home Office says it hopes it will be "competitive", and reports have put the total cost at about £60.

People in Manchester will only be able to get the cards by applying directly to the National Identity Service. They will not be able to get them from shops and post offices for another two years.

"ID cards will deliver real benefits to everyone, including increased protection against criminals, illegal immigrants and terrorists," the home secretary said.

Government officials will seek to allay people's concerns about the amount of personal data to be collected and retained for the new cards, saying it will be no greater than for passports.

"I think it is important to recognise that we're not collecting some massive accumulation of information about citizens," said James Hall, chief executive of the Identity and Passport Service.

Airport resistance

Non-EU residents have been required to have identity cards since the end of last year.

Shadow home secretary Chris Grayling said the Conservatives would scrap ID cards but were not "assuming vast savings", as much of the money has already been spent.

He told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "We are still talking about somewhere between £1bn and £2bn which, at a time when our public finances are in a right Royal mess, is a saving worth having in my view."

"I have done nothing wrong and I have nothing to hide, why wouldn't I want a card? "

Mike, Manchester

He claimed "the government's plans are quite clearly for a compulsory ID card scheme in the end" and people on low incomes, such as pensioners, should not be forced to pay for them.

He also questioned the value of the Manchester trial, arguing it was "very hard to see" how it could be made to work on a voluntary basis in a single city.

If the Conservatives win the next election they would scrap the scheme, said Mr Grayling, adding: "We don't think the nation can afford them and they won't happen."

'Big Brother'

Efforts to issue cards to pilots and other airport workers - a scheme which is being trialled at Manchester and London City airports - are meeting with growing resistance.

Pilots say they are effectively being forced into signing up for the cards.

"Our members believed the government promise that the ID card would be voluntary," said Jim McAuslan, general secretary of the pilots' union Balpa.

"But they now know it is anything but. Our members must have an airside pass to operate aircraft and now discover that to get that pass they must have a national ID card.

"This is coercion and a case of Big Brother knows best."

Officials said they were prepared to work with unions to resolve any differences but stressed that ID cards would improve security at airports and speed up recruitment procedures.

Dr Edgar Whitley of the London School of Economics has been warning about the cost of the scheme - which he has estimated at £10bn-£20bn - for the past four years.

The government's figure for the cost to the Home Office is about £5bn.

Dr Whitley told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "The more I learn about it, the less impressed I've become.

"The government said one of the benefits would be you'll be able to use your identity card to get personalised public services.

"But the most recent date for when that will start to happen is 2015. So the people in Manchester, if they enrol with their cards, won't get any particular benefit until four or five years from now."

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