UK information watchdog orders city to stop recording taxi cab conversations

CASSANDRA VINOGRAD, The Associated Press

LONDON (AP) -- Britain's information watchdog on Wednesday ordered a city council to stop the mandatory recording of people's conversations in taxis, saying the policy breaches the Data Protection act.

Since August 2009, Southampton City Council has required all taxis and private-hire vehicles to install CCTV equipment to constantly record images and the conversations of both drivers and passengers.

Information Commissioner Christopher Graham said Wednesday that the policy was "disproporationate" and that the council had `'gone too far" by requiring the recordings.

"We recognize the council's desire to ensure the safety of passengers and drivers, but this has to be balanced against the degree of privacy that most people would reasonably expect in the back of a taxi cab," he said in a statement.

Graham said CCTV cameras can still be used in cabs, but that the compulsory recording of conversations must stop. Southampton, a city with a sea port, is located 75 miles (120 kilometers) southwest of London.

The Information Commission also said that Oxford City Council has suspended plans for a similar policy after the watchdog warned the council's plans would breach the Data Protection Act.

Southampton City Council said it was considering an appeal of the order. Jacqui Rayment, the council's deputy leader, defended the recordings, saying that the data are encrypted and only downloaded if there is a specific complaint against a driver or if police request access to it in order to investigate an alleged offense.

"We are disappointed with this decision as it is about safety for both the drivers and passengers," Rayment said.

Britain has hundreds of thousands of surveillance cameras in public places, including many trains, subways and buses. But Southampton's use of audio recorders in licensed taxi cabs has outraged civil liberty campaigners.

Nick Pickles, director of the civil liberties campaign group Big Brother Watch, welcomed the decision Wednesday regarding what he called Southampton's "unjustified and intrusive measure."

The Information Commissioner enforces Britain's Data Protection Act and has the

power to levy fines or pursue prosecution when laws are broken.

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