

Starmer hails India's digital ID as 'massive success'

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Sir Keir Starmer hailed India's controversial national digital identification programme as a "massive success" as the prime minister said his scheme could see the public use ID cards to access a range of services.

Starmer held talks yesterday with Nandan Nilekani, co-founder and chair of Indian tech services giant Infosys, who was also the first chair of the Unique Identification Authority of India, the government body that delivered the giant ID database over a decade ago.

Starmer shrugged off criticism of India's ID programme, which has become crucial for access to that country's welfare system.

Speaking during a trade visit to Mumbai, he told reporters India had "already

done ID and made a massive success of it". Starmer said while most of the discussion about ID cards had been around immigration, he believed they could be "good passports" for British citizens in other ways.

"There is a case to be made about the benefits of voluntary ID into other areas, and obviously we need to make that case," he said.

"I don't know how many times the rest of you have had to look in the bottom drawer for three bills when you want to get your kids into school or apply for this or apply for that, it drives me to frustration."

The prime minister's spokesperson said digital ID cards in Britain could be used on a voluntary basis for easier access to services including welfare, childcare and driving licences. More than 2.8mn people have signed an

online parliamentary petition against their introduction in the UK.

The proposed scheme would give every person with a legal right to be in the UK a digital ID accessible on their phones. It will aim to make it easier for employers to be able to tell who has the right to work in the country.

People will not be required to carry the ID but it will be compulsory for right-to-work checks.

Starmer's spokesperson said the prime minister had sought the meeting with Nilekani to learn lessons from the Indian project. The spokesperson said the UK government planned to build its own ID card system within the public sector rather than through a private outsourcing company.

India began issuing a 12-digit unique identity for Indian citizens and residents 16 years ago under a programme

called Aadhaar, which has more than 99 per cent penetration in the country. The project has faced challenges on weak data protection framework and concerns over inadequate privacy protection.

India's supreme court struck down petitions challenging the project. However, it has restricted its mandatory use largely to welfare schemes, helping curtail corruption and fraud. Activists say biometric authentication using Aadhaar has led to some of the most marginalised being excluded from accessing welfare benefits at times.

Starmer has previously claimed Aadhaar had saved the Indian government \$10bn a year by reducing fraud and leakages in welfare schemes. That figure has been contested by several advocacy groups, who claim the scale of the savings has been overstated.