

Request - FOI 5088

I see from this article in the Birmingham mail

<http://www.birminghammail.net/news/birmingham-news/2010/11/15/lie-detectors-dropped-by-government-97319-27657332/>

That the council is continuing to use Voice Stress Analysis in the processing of benefit claims.

Can you under FOIA supply me with:

- a) The date the system was installed.
- b) It's costs (preferably broken down so that one-off and recurring costs are clear)
- c) Copies of reviews, evaluations or assessments of the systems effectiveness carried out by or on behalf of the council. If not contained in those documents please also supply me with:
 - The numbers of calls (preferably broken down per annum) where voice stress analysis would have been active.
 - The number of those calls where voice analysis lead to further investigation of the claim
 - The number of those further investigations where fraud was found to have taken place.
 - For those calls where analysis indicated further action any demographic breakdown carried out by the council (age, gender and race)
- d) if exact figures are not available for the above, any estimates or sample based surveys of the systems effectiveness.
- e) copies of any communication with the council press office or communications team in relation to this FOI.

Please process as much of this request as possible within the time permitted. I request that you begin by examining those electronic stores of information most easily searched.

Response – FOI 5088

I am writing in respect of your recent enquiry for information regarding the use of Voice Recognition Analysis (VRA) in the processing of Housing/Council Tax Benefit, held by the Authority under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I would like to take this opportunity to set out some context in relation to the way in which we have approached the use of this process. Unlike some other pilot areas, the prevention and detection of fraud was not the only, or indeed the main focus for our participation in the scheme.

VRA was viewed as having potential value both in terms of cost effectiveness and as a customer service improvement initiative. Currently Birmingham City Council has around 150,000 claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Good practice would indicate that benefit claims should be reviewed periodically, particularly where there has been no recent reported change of circumstance. It was solely for this purpose that the assessment tool was used, not in relation to new claims or other administrative or fraud related activity.

Using VRA offered the ability to review a customer's benefit claim by means of a 20 minute telephone call to the customer at a time convenient to them, rather than a more costly paper review, which might involve the customer making trips to our offices to present further information and evidence.

Under the terms of the agreed pilot with the Department for Work and Pensions, where the assessment process indicated 'low risk' we were able to renew the claim immediately, even where there had been a change in circumstances. You will see from our results that this was the situation in a large majority of assessments, 94% of calls resulted in a low risk classification that required no further follow up.

You may also note that the changes identified resulted in a ratio of reductions to increases in benefit of 2:1 on low risk changes compared to 4:1 for high risk cases.

The low risk cases were subject to a 5% check throughout the trials and overwhelmingly validated the process, with 97% of checks confirming the details provided were correct.

Very few perceived fraudulent cases were identified with less than 1% referred for further fraud investigation.

The decision made at the outset of the pilot not to withdraw claims as a result of the VRA process alone was seen as a useful safeguard for customers whose particular circumstances meant that a telephone review would be unsuitable or could result in

false readings. As a result 18% of contacts were assessed as unsuitable for interview due to age, disability or language needs.

Having set up a programme of work we took the decision, based on our local experience to continue to use VRA through to its completion. Whether or not we continue to use the system in the future is still under consideration as the end of the pilot status and the decision by the Department for Work and Pensions may now mean that the cost effective nature of the process is diminished.

I hope this information helps to set the context of our work in this area in Birmingham.

To answer your specific questions:

- a) Birmingham City Council began trialling VRA on 24 September 2007. Information regarding trials during 2007-2008 has been made public in the form of a written Ministerial Statement released on 11 March 2009.
- b) Costs – the set up costs were funded by The Department for Work and pensions. Birmingham City Council received a grant towards the set up and pilot expenses of £63,500. The cost benefit analysis suggested that undertaking reviews using this methodology was around £4.36 per claim cheaper than alternative methods of completing reviews.
- c) Reports can be obtained from Birmingham City Council website on: -
<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/DocumentList.aspx?DocTypeID=2&DocType=Minutes> and
<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/DocumentList.aspx?DocTypeID=3&DocType=Report>
- d) Not applicable – costs provided
- e) Not applicable