

Lie detector voice tests trap 4,000 fraudsters

A LIE detector test trapped nearly 4,000 benefit cheats in just four months.

The offenders were picking up council tax discounts worth £1.4million by falsely claiming they lived alone.

But they were caught out by technology that analyses phone calls for signs of stress in the speaker's voice.

Southwark council in South London used the system to check on 53,000 households claiming the 25 per cent council tax discount.

It found that in approximately one in 13 cases, the discount was being wrongly claimed.

A council spokesman said: 'We are very pleased with the results. Between July and November, we have removed 3,851 people from the list of those claiming the discount.'

'It has resulted in additional bills of £1.4million of council tax which is payable.'

The voice risk analysis system works by analysing the pitch of call-

By **Sam Greenhill**

work and pensions secretary John Hutton ordered a pilot study four years ago in which 24 local authorities tested the concept.

Two years ago, however, the Government abandoned the detector tests saying they were unreliable.

An academic study also raised doubts by suggesting the technology was little better than 'astronomy' at detecting fraud.

Insurance companies similar systems to catch fraudsters.

A Southwark spokesman said claimants who did not speak English as their first language or had hearing or cognitive problems were exempt from the voice checks.

Richard Livingstone, the council's cabinet member for finance and resources, said: 'We are taking a tough stance against fraud.'

'Any resident found making a false claim will be fully investigated and the necessary action taken.'

A spokesman for Capita - the private firm contracted by Southwark to carry out the checks - said it preferred not to describe it as a lie detector test, insisting it used the voice checking system together with 'behavioural analysis by trained operators'.

He insisted: 'The technology is not used in isolation.'

A spokesman for London Councils said he did not know of any other authorities in the capital using the system.

A similar response was given by a spokesman for the Local Government Association, which represents 423 authorities across Britain.

Harrow Council has used the voice analysis system to check on housing benefit and council tax benefit claims.

A spokesman for the authority said: 'We did try this technology but stopped using it three years ago.'

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'Very pleased with the results'

ers' voices when they are asked questions by council officials.

If the system suspects a lie is being told, a beep sounds in the operator's ear. Once alerted, the operator is trained to begin asking questions that may uncover the truth.

It can lead to a full investigation into claims for housing benefit, council tax, income support and jobseeker's allowance. Claimants are warned in advance that the phone call is being recorded and monitored for the detection of fraud.

Anyone who refuses to take part in the call is likely to be visited in person for an assessment of their claim. It is not the first time lie detectors have been used by councils. Former