

UK politician slams 'lie detector' fraud tests

January 23 2013, by Jill Lawless

A British politician has resigned over a county council's decision to use voice analysis technology that some liken to lie detector tests on people claiming a tax discount.

Fiona Ferguson, leader of the Conservative group on Cornwall Council in southwestern England, says she has a "fundamental ethical objection" to this use of the technology.

"It is clearly right that Cornwall Council takes a strong line against people who deliberately mis-claim tax benefits but in this case I am more concerned about the impact on the vast majority of honest claimants," she said in a letter Tuesday resigning her post in the county Cabinet.

The council said Wednesday it had hired private outsourcing firm Capita to use "specialist technology" to assess people claiming a discount for one-adult households. The council says it hopes to save 1 million pounds (\$1.6 million) currently lost to fraud.

Capita claims its "voice risk analysis" technology can identify "the effects of emotions, stress, cognitive activity and other factors through micro-changes in the callers' voice frequencies."

Capita's website says the technology was introduced in 2008 and has been used by local authorities nationwide.

It was given a trial run by Britain's Department for Work and Pensions

several years ago, but a 2010 report concluded that evidence of the technology's effectiveness was not strong enough to recommend its use.

Civil liberties group Big Brother Watch said it had not seen evidence that the technology was being used by many local authorities.

Its deputy director, Emma Carr, said Cornwall Council had "completely wasted money on an illiberal and unproven technology."

"This sort of action stinks of 'guilty until proven innocent' and perhaps it would be more useful to introduce more rigorous checks and testing before benefits are handed out," she said.

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