

# Voice Risk Analysis Pilots: Perspectives from staff, claimants and potential claimants

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The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned IFF Research to conduct research into the experiences of those in Voice Risk Analysis (VRA) pilot areas. The research was designed to feed into the overall evaluation of the VRA Pilots and sought to collect qualitative evidence from staff, claimants and potential claimants on their views and experiences of VRA.

Piloting of VRA technology in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) claims began in 2007. The first wave of pilot projects was extended with a larger-scale trial of VRA taking place from late 2008 throughout 2009. This research was conducted in four local authorities (LAs) that took part in the second phase of piloting: Aberdeen, Barking and Dagenham, Coventry and Doncaster. Barking and Dagenham contracted out their VRA calls to a Capita-run call centre, whereas the other three areas managed the service in-house at council offices using benefit officers to deliver VRA calls.

The main objective of the qualitative research was to understand whether experiences of VRA were positive or negative. More specifically the research sought to understand whether or not VRA is likely to deter those with a legitimate claim from making a benefit claim, or whether a negative experience of the software is likely to put claimants off continuing their (valid) claim.

The research method involved a mixture of focus groups, in-depth interviews and site visits to councils as well as a Capita call centre and took place in two waves (October-November 2009, followed by March-July 2010).

It should be noted that significant difficulties were encountered in obtaining representative samples of claimants who had been through the VRA process.

While it was possible to conduct some claimant interviews, the views of claimants presented here should be interpreted with caution. It was not possible to obtain a sufficient sample of either claimants identified as 'high risk' who were then found to be legitimate claimants, or those who decided not to proceed with their claim after taking part in a VRA call, and so the views of these claimant groups are not represented by this research. The claimant experiences presented here only cover those who were judged 'low risk' who may have been more likely to have had a positive experience of VRA.

## How Voice Risk Analysis was trialled in the pilot areas

The four LAs selected for the research tended to use VRA for simple, straightforward cases, and only with claimant groups that they judged to be suitable for the process.

Throughout the VRA Pilots, claimants were still required to fill out the existing paper claim form and post it in or drop it off at the LA. The information on this claim form was then used to decide whether or not a claim was suitable for VRA. Those typically excluded from the VRA pilot at this stage included:

- complex cases (for example, people with second homes, people from abroad, people saying they are paying rent to a friend or relative, students or self-employed people);
- vulnerable claimants, such as those who were elderly or who indicated on their claim form that they had a learning disability or mental health problem.

Findings from this research should therefore be interpreted in the context of the VRA process only being trialled on particular types of claims and claimants. It should also be noted that as the existing paper claim form was used alongside the VRA call the potential efficiencies of the system were not necessarily apparent to claimants during the pilot, with all still filling in the form and posting it to the council, often with supporting documentation.

While the exact approach to arranging the VRA calls differed by area, they all shared the approach of rejecting 'cold calls' to claimants in favour of giving the claimant some prior warning that the call was going to take place either through sending out a letter or setting an appointment.

## Staff views

Staff stressed that VRA enabled them to process higher volumes of claims more efficiently. They welcomed having the ability to fast-track straightforward claims and felt they had delivered a better service to the bulk of claimants as a result.

Almost as an aside, staff felt that VRA could also be a useful tool in terms of picking up some ineligible applicants and those who have had a change in circumstances. They felt that of all the elements of the process – the use of the phone, the script, spotting of 'behaviours' and the high risk alerts (or 'beeps') – the former two were the most important in encouraging claimants to reveal important information during the claim. The 'beeps' that indicated a high risk alert were seen as unreliable – while these were sometimes useful as a prompt to listen more closely to what the claimant was saying, on the other hand they could be a distraction when they were set off by background noise or apparently at random.

Staff noted that in their experience very few claimants had asked questions about VRA or had declined to continue with the call after being told about VRA. It was their view that the vast majority of applicants were unlikely to pay much attention to the VRA message read out at the start of the call and as such were unaware that the technology was used during the call.

## Claimant views

Confirming the view of staff, most claimants were unaware that they had been through the VRA process. Instances of claimants noting that the claim or review conducted during the VRA pilot was quicker or more efficient than previous experiences were rare. This is largely because all claimants had to complete the paper claim form at the outset and the majority also provided supporting documentation meaning that the process looked very similar to the one used previously from the claimants' perspective (in fact, for some it seemed more burdensome as they had to take part in the phone call as well as completing the lengthy form).

However, the positive side of the lack of awareness that VRA was used was that very few claimants reported negative experiences of the call. Several noted that they believed they would have been anxious if they had been fully aware of the nature of the VRA technology which was being used on them.

Overall though, claimants were generally happy for VRA to be used in future calls they might make about benefits issues and no claimants stated that it would put them off claiming altogether. However, claimants felt strongly that alternative routes should be kept available for those who would prefer to make a claim in person or by post.

These are the views of those claimants judged low risk after their VRA call and who should have had their claim fast-tracked as a result (even though this may not have been apparent to the claimant). It would be valuable to also seek the views of those who were 'false positives' (i.e. who were judged 'high risk' after the initial call but who on further investigation had a legitimate claim) and those who decided not to continue with their claim after being informed about VRA. It might be hypothesised that these claimants had different – perhaps more negative – experiences of the VRA process.

## Potential claimant views

On the whole, potential claimants were pragmatic about the use of VRA technology in processing benefits claims, with some actively positive about it and most others happy with the concept as long as there was proof that it worked.

Whilst current claimants found the role of VRA in making the claims process quicker and more convenient the most persuasive argument in its favour, potential claimants were more drawn to it by its potential to combat fraud.

Almost all potential claimants that took part in the research would be happy to make a claim via a VRA call. Echoing the views of claimants, some anticipated that they would be nervous during the call and that this would unduly attract a high risk outcome. Many knew of a relative who they believed would struggle with the process and again emphasised that face-to-face and postal channels should remain as options for the people that VRA may not be suitable for.

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You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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