# Concerns rise over AI integration in public services and its effect on vulnerable groups



In a landscape increasingly dominated by technological advancements, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into public services is stirring significant debate, particularly concerning its potential effects on vulnerable demographics, such as state pensioners. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in the UK is poised to expand its use of AI to reform Jobcentres, aiming to enhance the delivery of information regarding jobs, skills, and other supports. This initiative is projected to save work coaches considerable time, ostensibly streamlining services for those in need.

However, concern has been raised about the speed of AI implementation, particularly from advocacy groups aiming to protect marginalized communities. The charity Turn2us has warned that a hastily executed rollout could pose risks, suggesting that reliance on historical data to inform AI may inadvertently lead to the perpetuation of biases against vulnerable populations. Shelley Hopkinson, head of policy and influencing at Turn2us, articulated these apprehensions, stating, "AI has the potential to improve speed and consistency in the social security system, but errors from rushed implementation could cause serious harm to people relying on support."

Data from investigations into the DWP’s existing machine-learning programmes have provided ammunition for these concerns. A recent report highlighted by The Guardian revealed that these technologies had disproportionately flagged individuals based on characteristics such as age, disability, marital status, and nationality in their assessments for universal credit fraud. As a result, approximately 200,000 people have faced wrongful investigations pertaining to housing benefit due to unreliable algorithmic judgments.

Hopkinson elaborated further to The Big Issue, advocating for a more cautious approach to AI integration. She said, "AI integration should be guided by consultation and transparency so that the system meets the needs of everyone and builds trust that decisions are fair and accurate. This must come with clear accountability and safeguards to allow for challenge. AI must work for people, not against them, prioritising people’s lives and wellbeing in decision-making."

Despite these concerns, the DWP anticipates substantial productivity gains from AI implementation. The Tony Blair Institute previously estimated that the DWP could enhance its efficiency by freeing up 40% of its operational time through the use of these technologies, potentially translating to an annual productivity boost of close to £1 billion. Sir Peter Schofield, the DWP's permanent secretary, emphasised the positive impact of AI in existing support programmes, including the Health Transformation Programme and the Service Modernisation Programme, which aim to assist individuals with additional needs.

Additionally, political figures are expressing optimism about AI's role in driving growth across both public and private sectors. Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, has endorsed this technological shift, asserting that it will "make our public services better" while simultaneously boosting economic growth.

As the DWP embarks on this significant technological transition, the balance between efficiency and safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable groups remains a complex and crucial factor in the broader conversation surrounding AI in public services.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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