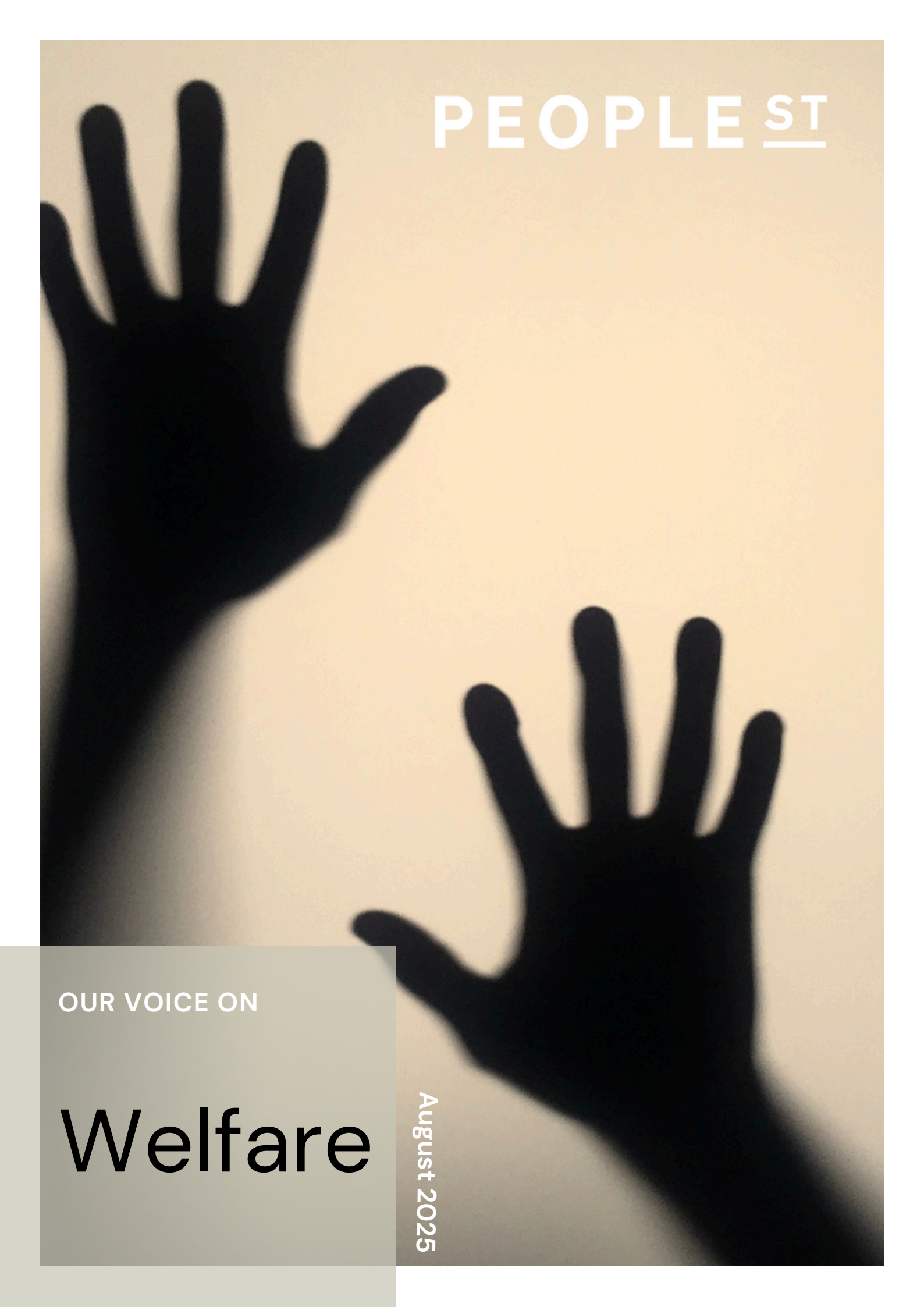




PEOPLE ST

OUR VOICE ON

Welfare

August 2025

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01 Introduction

Whilst this report will be shared with policy makers, ministers, decision makers, and researchers, we have designed this report for the communities we serve.

The purpose of this research was to surface the living experiences of the communities most impacted by welfare reform. Our aim is to act as bridges into communities traditionally excluded from mainstream conversations.

We removed barriers to participation including digital exclusion, language and literacy challenges. Our vision was to generate research from the ground up, taking communities with us so that we enrich the wider research ecosystem.

Our research was designed and led by people with lived and living experiences of the issues we explore. The following report is a summary of our June 2025 Community-led research.

The findings reveals a system that too often punishes people for being poor, sick, or in crisis, leaving them to navigate unemployment and benefits with little support, dignity, or hope.

Participants described an exhausting maze of complex entitlements, digital barriers, and language hurdles that turn the “safety net” into a site of further harm, especially for

those with limited English, learning differences, or no access to technology.

Many shared stories of humiliation and fear. Being treated as ‘liars’, pushed into unsuitable work, or made to repeatedly prove their worth while their mental health deteriorated.

Even those grateful for support stressed that benefits barely covered essentials, with instability, stigma, and long delays eroding their sense of safety and belonging.

People who have worked hard, cared for families, or fled violence expressed a deep desire to rebuild their lives, yet face systemic barriers that trap them in cycles of insecurity. They know what they need to succeed: English fluency, digital literacy, good communication and accredited skills, and support designed with empathy and flexibility.

What they demand, at its core, is simple: The right to security, dignity, and fair opportunities to thrive, not just survive, in a system built to uphold—not undermine—their humanity.

On the next page, you will find a plain language explanation to help you understand how the proposed changes to benefits fit into the bigger picture. Words in **bold** indicate there is an explanation at the bottom of the page. We also use brackets () for shorter explanations.

02 Background

Understanding the background in which decisions and **policy reform** happens is crucial to bring everyone with us on the journey.

The current UK Government has committed to reform the UK **welfare system**. The UK Government has said it wants to change the welfare system to make it fairer, more supportive, and easier to navigate, especially for disabled people. Below is a clear explanation of what's being proposed, why it matters, and the concerns being raised.

In launching the government's "Plan for Change," **Work and Pensions Secretary** Liz Kendall said that too many disabled people feel trapped in the current system, afraid that if they try to work, they might lose the benefits they rely on. She said the aim is to create a welfare system that offers proper support for those who can work, and long-term security for those who can't. The plan promises to break down barriers, support people to live with dignity and independence, and open up more opportunities for work where that's possible.

As part of this, the government has committed to "co-producing" key parts of the reforms with disabled people.

Co-producing means working together to

design and deliver changes, not just consulting (talking to) people after the decisions have been made, but involving them meaningfully from the start. However, the proposals announced so far have already caused concern, including protests, public criticism, and opposition (don't agree) from some Labour MPs.

Disabled people's organisations have said that the government's starting point appears to be reducing spending, not improving support. Many fear that changes to benefit rules and eligibility assessments could push some of the most vulnerable people further into poverty.

Labour MP Nadia Whittome criticised the process, saying: "It's not co-production if the government is starting with cuts and asking disabled people where they should fall, instead of asking how to build a system that truly supports disabled people." She called for the plans to be paused and redesigned from the ground up, with disabled people leading that process.

These fears are not new. Past welfare reforms have also claimed to be about fairness and support, but were often driven by the goal of saving money.

A **Policy** is a plan or set of rules made by governments or an organisation about how things should be done. Policies are there to guide decisions and keep things fair.

Reform means fixing something that's not working well, it means changing the way something is done to make it fairer, better, or more helpful.

Welfare system is a way the government helps people who are having a hard time. It can give money, food, housing, or other support so people can have the basics they need to live.

Work and Pensions Secretary looks after benefits, pensions, and support for people who don't have jobs. In government, a "Secretary" is someone in charge of an important part of the country. They make big decisions, create rules, and make sure their department runs well.

03 What we did

Our research is designed to include the voices of communities and people who are traditionally excluded and whose voices are under-heard in decision making. We don't reach people through social media, cold-calls or through marketing campaigns. We build on trusted social networks.

Our team of Community Researchers are representative of the communities we serve. They have the lived and living experiences of the communities we reach, they have the community languages and cultural know-how. They are trusted and respected community leaders who help shape the research.

The research themes emerge from our community development work. We reflect on the issues emerging from the grassroots, and from systems and look at ways we can unite the bottom-up experiences with top-down perspectives.

We use the following questions as a guide:

- Is "it" impacting a range of communities?
- Is "it" something that communities are talking about and/or concerned about?
- Are there policy "levers" we can feed into?
- Is the issue grounded in social justice?
- Are we the right people to explore this theme?

Once we have agreed on the topic, we design a research project that runs between 2–5 weeks. We work in weekly sprints (cycles), improving and reflecting as we progress.

For this research, the theme of Poverty, Workless-ness, Unpaid Caring and Benefits emerged. We briefed 15 Community Researchers from a range of backgrounds and geographies. We wanted to reach the following:

- Multi-ethnic communities with disabilities, including mental ill health.
- Black-African communities, particularly women with dependents who have experienced asylum, domestic violence and homelessness.
- Multi-ethnic working class communities experiencing digital exclusion.
- Migrants with low literacy where English is a second or third language.
- Inner city locations especially areas with high deprivation index.

For this project, we spent 4 weeks collecting stories (speaking to people) and a final session at the end to draw out lessons.

Given the "heaviness" of the stories we were collecting, the need for regular debrief and reflection was high.

This was factored (planned) into the design.

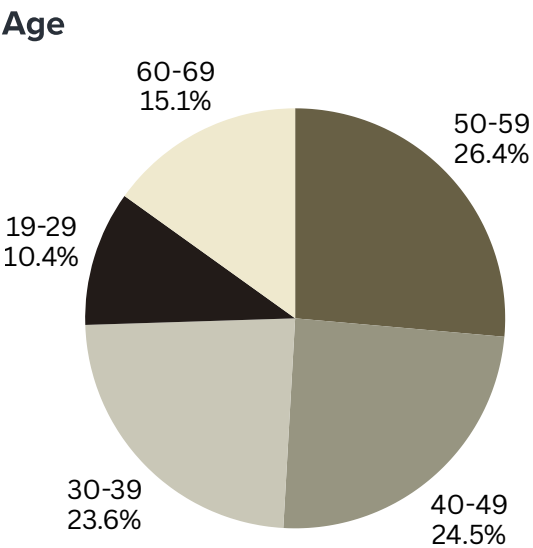
04 Who we spoke to

We take an intersectional approach to participant recruitment.

Taking an intersectional approach means we aim to reach people experiencing multiple, and intersecting barriers to inclusion. We therefore don't use ethnicity as a measure of diversity, but look to include other factors such as literacy, digital confidence, postcode, age, health and employment status.

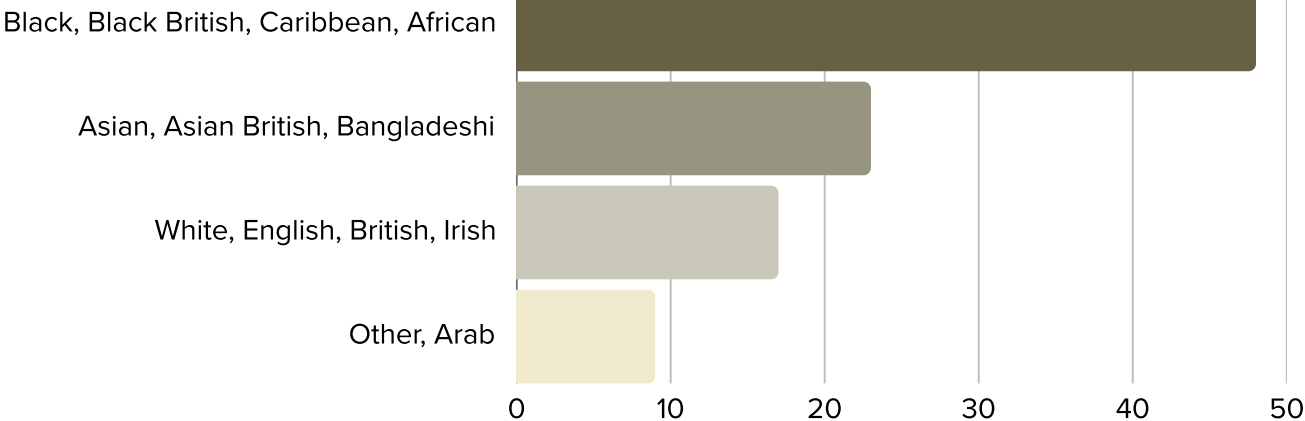
Total
Participants
107

Gender
54% Female, **45%** Male and **1%** Gender Fluid.



Geography
50% East London. **18%** North London. **32%** South East England

Ethnicity



04 Who we spoke to

52%

Long Term
Health
Condition

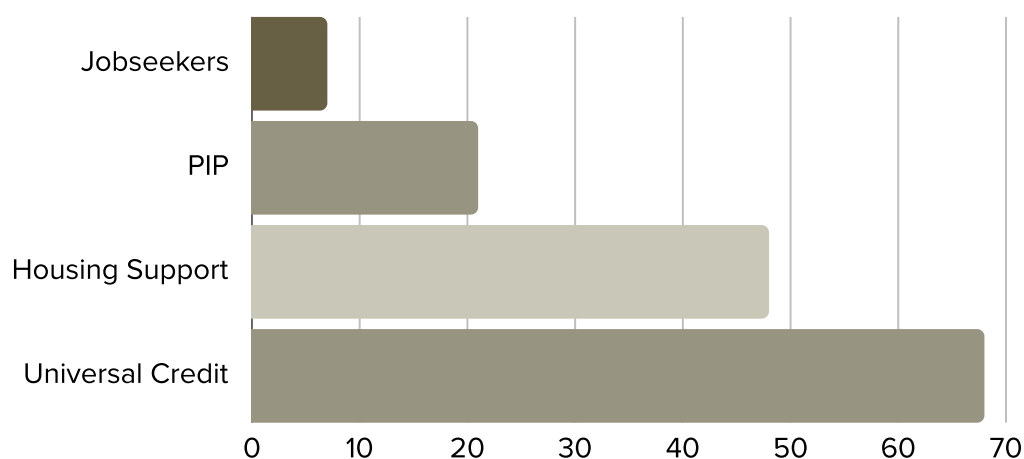
30%

Migrant,
refugee or
asylum

41%

Disability

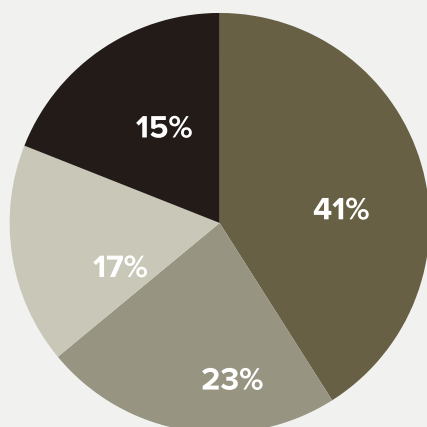
Type of benefits participants receive



Other Benefits

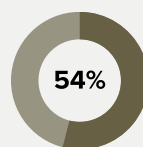
Carers Allowance	5
Asylum Support	2
Attendance Allowance	1
Widows Allowance	1

Main language spoken at home

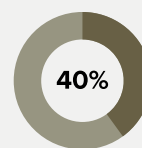


English Silheti Somali
Other: (Arabic, French, Yemeni, Otrjiherero, Swahili, Farsi, Chinese, Hindi and German)

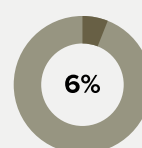
English Confidence



Confident reading
and speaking



Basic



Low to
none

Digital Confidence



65%

Low



35%

High

05 What we heard

1. Identity and Personal Experience Shape Every Interaction

People's identity, health, and life experiences profoundly shape how they encounter the benefits system.

For some, past incarceration or illness narrows options; for others, caring responsibilities or disability create daily hurdles.

What this means for people:

Circumstances like criminal records, long-term illness, caring responsibilities, trauma, and housing instability set the terms of people's options before they even meet a form, adviser or employer.

Most people are surviving, not building a future. They are trapped in a system that fails to support the agency needed to progress beyond welfare.

"Yeah, I've been on benefits, on and off, since I came out... no one's quick to give you a job when you've got a record... It keeps you afloat, but it doesn't help you move forward." — Male, Black British, 42, E14.

"I'm unable to work as I'm suffering from womb cancer... I have 4 children to look after..." — Female, Egyptian, Arabic speaker, 45, E6.

"Not having stable housing makes everything harder... I had to leave college... Without family support, it feels like I'm always trying to do everything alone." — Female, White British, 19, E14 (disowned by parents, LGBTQ+).

Impact: People feel boxed in by labels and life events. Benefits offer a lifeline, but the path out is narrow; everyday stability (health, care, housing) comes first, so progress stalls. There's a tension between gratitude and despair: benefits keep people alive, but the system rarely helps recipients build for a future independent of state aid.

O5 What we heard

2. A System Flawed in Its Design

The benefits system assumes everyone can read, write, and communicate well in English and navigate online forms. It is a layered and complicated system. Most feel it's a system that assumes everyone is lying or cheating.

Having left a violent relationship with caring responsibilities for 2 young children, our participant was left homeless and destitute. Her English was so poor that getting support or claiming benefits was a barrier she struggled to overcome.

People with learning difficulties and long-term illness find themselves sanctioned simply because they can't keep up with emails or paperwork. Instead of offering stability, the system often deepens people's vulnerability. The system is a stick, not the safety net people need.

What this means for people:

Language, learning differences, and health conditions collide with complex rules and paperwork. Without interpreters, flexible options, and accessible communication, people get sanctioned and penalised.

"After the domestic violence... her English was bad, so claiming benefits for her was challenging... they got her an interpreter and then slowly got there." — Female, Indian, Hindi speaker, 35, E13.

"I miss appointments because I can't read emails and I'm suffers from dyslexia. Then my Universal Credit gets stopped... causing a lot of distress." — Female, White British, 62, E2.

"PIP... took 11 months... interviewed her 3 times... asking the same question in different ways as though she was making a false application." — Female, Asian Bengali, 19, E7.

Impact: The process punishes people for not fitting a default claimant profile (fluent English, neurotypical, always online, always available). The cost is anxiety, lost income, diminished mental health, longterm unemployment, and generational poverty.

05 What we heard

3. Stripped of Dignity – Suspicion, Shame and Punishment

Over and over, people told us they felt humiliated by the process. Applications often involve intrusive questioning, repeated interviews, and constant suspicion.

What this means for people:

People feel interrogated, disbelieved, and exposed. Delays and cuts create a constant threat of destitution. Media narratives add stigma. Shame traps people.



“I felt humiliated...I was asked so many personal and graphic questions... those were the worst 12 months of his life.” — Male, Asylum applicant receiving death threats from family back home for being gay, 24, B11.

“I hate feeling dependent on a system that doesn’t really care if you make it or not... one mistake away from losing everything.” — Female, White Irish Traveller, 32, E3.

“On the TV it’s about how much disabled people cost... I knew I wouldn’t be able to work full-time... This led me to feel suicidal.” — Participant reflecting on stigma.

Impact: Trust erodes. People learn to share the bare minimum, brace for harm, and internalise shame. The safety net often feels like a trap door.

This stripping away of dignity leaves people exhausted and demoralised. Instead of compassion, they feel punished for needing help.

05 What we heard

4. The Digital Divide Widens Inequality

With most benefits managed online, those with limited digital skills or access are being left behind. Some participants described relying on children or family members to complete forms, while others gave up entirely until the situation was dire.

As one participant put it “Everything is online now and I’m just being left behind.”

The system assumes digital confidence that not everyone has. For people already under strain, this digital barrier compounds exclusion. Digital inequalities are not about access to a smart phone. The system ignores the complex and intersecting barriers that perpetuates inequity.

What this means for people:

Online-by-default systems assume devices, data, skills, and confidence. Many don’t have them or are anxious using them, so they rely on family or miss deadlines.

“Everything is online... I’m not good at digital and my English was not good enough to write a message.” — Female, Somali, Somali speaker, 42, N7.

DETAILS

OUTCOME

“The digital world... it moved on without me.” — Male, White Irish, 55 (UC & PIP; long-term unemployment).

“If a website changes how it looks, I’m lost all over again... it’s not second nature to me.” — Male, Scottish, 55, E3.

Impact: Missed payments, sanctions and avoidance of services. People need step-by-step help, practice time, and face-to-face support—not just links to forms. We need to create accessible and inclusive processes that tackle digital inequalities actively not retrospectively once sanctions are made.

05 What we heard

5. The Fragile and Unforgiving Employment Landscape

Most participants expressed a strong desire to work. But jobs are scarce, insecure, or impossible to balance with caring duties and health needs. Even when people do find work, navigating the overlap with benefits is confusing and risky. Many fear losing essential support by taking a low-paid and insecure job.

Whilst single parent families struggle to find work that accommodates their childcare needs or support families who have children with additional needs. This is a problem shared by all working families, yet if on benefits it's a source of shame.

Others spoke of demoralising cycles of rejection, with hundreds competing for a single role. This is particularly true for young people trying to secure 'safe' work whilst managing neurodiversity, mental ill health, and complex family dynamics.

People are left disillusioned and disconnected from a system that feels broken.

What this means for people:

People want to work, but jobs are scarce, inflexible or far; qualifications don't translate into jobs; care and health needs clash with rigid hours; and taking impermanent work can risk losing benefits.

"They want me to do courses to tick a box... None of the jobs they offer me make any sense for my situation... It just feels like a broken system." — Female, White British, 31, DA11.

"I've been looking for school hours work, because of my son's needs, but there is nothing around. I haven't really been able to get interviews... none of the jobs they offer me make any sense for my situation..." — Female, Black African, 45, N17.

"No job... had over 400 applications... no feedback... feels impossible." — Female, White British, 24, W6.

Impact: Confidence falls even as desire to contribute remains. Feeling trapped in a system that is hostile, lacks compassion and uses crude outcomes measures.

06 Recommendations

National

Make access inclusive by default: Require easy read; provide non-digital routes (phone/ in-person) equal to online; ban “online-only” compliance for vulnerable groups.

Reduce harm in assessments: statutory maximum decision times for UC/PIP/ asylum-linked benefits with automatic interim payments; trauma-informed questioning standards; limit repeat evidence where condition is long-term.

Make work pay and feel safe: improve the UC taper and earnings disregards; clearer, consistent rules for self-employed and people on sick treatment; allow a grace period so support doesn’t cliff-edge.

Recognise unpaid care and disability costs: uplift and reform Carer’s Allowance and disability-related additions to reflect real living costs; protect payments during appeals.

Right to flexible, local work from day one and incentives for school-hours and remote-first roles in sectors with shortages.

National digital inclusion offer tied to DWP: devices, data, and funded community learning with accredited progression for those who want it. Plus protections for those who cannot engage digitally.

Regional

Fund a network of community-led advice & **employability hubs with shared referral routes** across councils, NHS, VCSE and Jobcentres.

Embed a regional approach to **inclusive hiring:** day-one flexible working, school-hours posts, paid work experience, simplified applications, and guaranteed feedback.

Data-sharing agreements (consent-based) to reduce repetitive reassessments across agencies; standard “tell-us-once” adjustments for learning differences and interpreters.

Local

Trusted, face-to-face **advice hubs** in community settings, with walk-in casework for UC/PIP forms, appeals and evidence gathering; embed trauma informed and dignity-led interview practice. Digital confidence pathways: small-group, peer-led learning with step-by-step practice, devices/data lending.

Peer navigators (trained residents with lived experience) to accompany people through assessments, Jobcentre appointments and employer interactions.

Employment that fits real lives: broker school-hours roles, **local flexible jobs** and work-trials; provide travel bursaries and childcare support for interviews/training.

07 Final Thoughts

The research highlights the complexities people face before, during, and after their welfare journey begins.

We are told a compelling story of a system that has a safety net, should we fall.

But in reality, it feels like a trapdoor.

Welfare reform cannot happen in a silo in Westminster. It must coproduce with the people it serves.

Acknowledgements

To everyone to took part in the research conversation, we appreciate your openness and your time, thank you.

To our Community Researchers and Outreach team, thank you for your continued commitment and dedication.

Contact us for more information.

This isn't the end, it's the beginning. We will be sharing more in the coming months.

