



Navigating
Digital Welfare

Methods Report

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The Navigating Digital Welfare Project is a short-term research project funded by the University of Edinburgh's Challenge Investment Fund (CIF) 2021- 2022.

The project team consists of:

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- Dr Morgan Currie, Senior Lecturer in Science and Technology Studies, University of Edinburgh (Co-I)
- Charlotte Zealley, Doctoral Researcher in Social Policy, University of Edinburgh (Research Assistant)
- Dr Jimmy Turner, Research Associate, Binks Hub, University of Edinburgh (Workshop assistant)

The workshops drew on specialist support from:

- Jean McEwan (Zine artist and facilitator)
- Hetian Li (Graphic designer)

Through this project we sought to pilot the use of participatory, arts-based, and dialogical interactive stations in a drop-in workshop setting to gather insights and evidence on people's experiences of applying for different benefits/social security payments or support services in Scotland.

This is a methodological report. We provide details of the workshop approach and station methods. We explain the research process with the aim of contributing to discussions around methods for understanding lived experiences and perceptions into social security administration. In doing so, we seek to support other researchers and service designers who are exploring ways to undertake social research or increase participation in service design.

The audience for this report may be:

- Social researchers in academia and the third sector
- Social security delivery organisations who seek to understand user experiences
- Research commissioners

Further details on the project, including findings reports, a Zine, and briefings will be available at: digitalwelfare.sps.ed.ac.uk

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Research context

In this section we briefly outline the policy context and rationale for the research project.

Social security is a key component of the UK welfare state. Often discussed as ‘welfare’ or ‘benefits’, social security refers to state provided income to people with household incomes below a specific level (i.e. through means-testing), to people with specific needs (e.g. disability payments), or as a universal payment. Social security is mostly a reserved matter, with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) responsible for much of the benefits system including delivering the State Pension and a range of working-age, disability and ill-health benefits to around 20 million people¹. However, there are spatial variations and devolved powers; this includes in Northern Ireland where social security is almost entirely devolved, and in Scotland where The Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Parliament and Government powers over benefits falling within certain categories, including extra-costs disability, industrial injuries, and carer benefits, as well as the power to top-up reserved benefits and create other new social security benefits. As such, people resident in Scotland may be entitled to benefits that are administered by different levels of government and agencies.

The Scottish Government is in the process of introducing a suite of new devolved benefits, and states that its approach to administration centres on a customer charter that focuses on “dignity, fairness, and respect”². Many of the new Scottish benefits are replacements for DWP benefits, such as Personal Independence Payment (being replaced by Adult Disability Payment from 2022³). The Scottish Government is also introducing new and additional benefits which do not have a direct equivalent elsewhere in the UK, such as the Scottish Child Payment⁴ – a weekly £20 per child (aged under 6), payment for low-income families. The devolution of welfare powers in Scotland has led to the establishment of a new Social Security agency in Scotland, charged with the design and delivery of 14 devolved benefits for 1.4 million people, worth approximately £3.5 billion. Figure one outlines the complex development of benefit responsibility and administration in Scotland.

¹ [An introduction to social security in the UK - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/research-and-factsheets/2018-05-01-an-introduction-to-social-security-in-the-uk)

² Scottish Government: <https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/about/our-charter>

³ Citizen’s Advice: [https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/adult-disability-payment-s/adult-disability-payment/adult-disability-payment-s/#:~:text=Adult%20Disability%20Payment%20is%20a,Payment%20\(PIP\)%20in%20Scotland.](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/adult-disability-payment-s/adult-disability-payment/adult-disability-payment-s/#:~:text=Adult%20Disability%20Payment%20is%20a,Payment%20(PIP)%20in%20Scotland.)

⁴ Scottish Government: <https://www.mygov.scot/scottish-child-payment>

UK Social Security: Projected structure in 2025

Based on Scottish Government and Department for Work & Pensions forecasts



Figure 1: Projected Structure 2025. Source: House of Commons Library 'An introduction to social security in the UK'⁵

Despite devolution developments in Scotland, the UK Government remains responsible for the main out of work benefits, including Universal Credit (around 455,000 people in Scotland receive Universal Credit)⁶. The DWP administer Universal Credit through digital and automated processes, although people in receipt often also have to attend (DWP managed) Jobcentre Plus to meet conditionality requirements.

⁵ Hobson, F., Kennedy, S., and Mackley, A. (2022) 'An introduction to social security in the UK'. House of Commons Research Briefing: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9535/CBP-9535.pdf>

⁶ Universal Credit Scotland Bulletin Jan 2022: <https://tinyurl.com/5n98sk7s>

Other agencies responsible for devolved benefits or local authority support schemes use their own administrative processes and advice services to support people to understand and access the benefits they are entitled to. For example, the DWP administers Universal Credit via the online (and automated) Universal Credit account; the Scottish Government administers Best Start Grants and Scottish Child Payments through online applications via Social Security Scotland; Local Authorities administer school uniform grants, free school meals, some people's Housing Benefit, and emergency Scottish Welfare Payments. National and local third sector organisations often play an essential role in the provision of advice services, sign-posting, and support during application or appeal processes.

Research into social security policies and implementation identifies how various processes and agencies can create a 'patchwork' of welfare⁷, complex local welfare systems⁸, and integration difficulties for users⁹. There are complex legal and organisational responsibilities underpinning the administration of different social security payments. Each organisation may reform application processes (increasingly moving towards digital interfaces and automated processes) in relation to the benefit they administer or their organisational service. However, this singular view may fail to situate the digital and automated application experience within the context of individuals who must navigate and understand multiple benefits and various human and digital information from a range of sources. Our Navigating Digital Welfare project focuses on this complex, multi-organisational social security system for people resident in Scotland. We seek to better understand the experience of benefit recipients interacting with different agencies and using various application processes¹⁰.

⁷ Bennett, H., and Weakley, S (2021) Probing the patchwork of welfare services in Scotland: The experience as specialist advisors to a UK parliamentary committee. Policy Scotland Blog: Available here: <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/welfare-services-in-scotland-the-experience-as-specialist-advisors-to-uk-parliamentary-committee/>

⁸ Bennett, H. (2016) "Anti-poverty activities in a liberal welfare model: Local levers and multi-level tensions in Glasgow, UK" in Johansson, H., and Panican, A. Eds. Combating Poverty in Local Welfare Systems- Active Inclusion Strategies in European Cities. Palgrave

⁹ Angelin, A., Bennett, H., and Zielenska, M. (2016) "Provisions of relevance for lone mothers, long-term unemployed and working poor in five countries- are provisions multidimensional and integrated?" in Halvorsen, R. and Hvinden, B. Combating Poverty in Europe: Active Inclusion in a Multi-level and Multi-Actor context. Edward Elgar.

¹⁰ Further information about the different benefits and social security system in the UK can be found at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9535/CBP-9535.pdf>

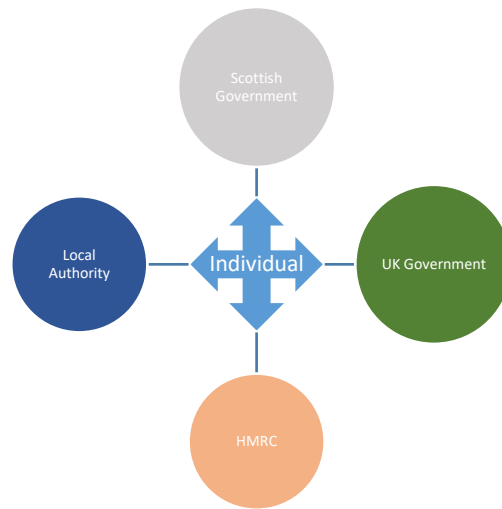


Figure 2: Individual's viewpoint of multiple organisations and application processes

Research Aim/Objectives:

1. To explore how people in receipt of multiple benefits experience various digital-interfaces and automation processes.
2. To develop, test and pilot creative methods workshops (using facilitated, arts-based data collection and engagement techniques) as a way to gather these experiences and views.
3. Co-produce knowledge on the impact of different administrative processes and feed this back to designers and policy-makers.

The initial grant application specifically focussed on experiences of lone parents in receipt of benefits, on the knowledge that they would be likely to receive at least one devolved benefit (e.g. the Scottish Child Payment), alongside reserved benefits such as Universal Credit, PIP, or HMRC administered child benefit. Once we set up a steering group and started developing the plan for the workshops, we broadened the focus to include anyone in receipt of more than one benefit.

Funding remit and project resources

In this section we briefly provide details of the funding and research limitations to support the development and advancement of the methods discussed in this report. This information may be of particular use to academic researchers, funders, or research commissioners.

The University of Edinburgh's Challenge Investment Fund administered by the Edinburgh Future's Institute (EFI) funded the Navigating Digital Welfare project. The fund provides small funds (under £10k) for seed funding and pilot research. We designed the project to align with and contribute to EFI research priorities:

- Public Services; by supporting better joined-up service design and digital reforms
- Participatory; by contributing to the developing of participatory methods and bringing user experiences into the design process
- Future-facing; by identifying issues and complexities

The EFI awarded the funding in Dec 2021, with a requirement for all funds to be spent by July 2022. This created a 6-7 month timeline for the project. The approved grant covered:

- Cost for venue hire and catering for workshops
- 1 research assistant (12 days) to support the design & delivery of workshop stations and post event analysis/report writing.
- 1 creative arts assistant (6 days) to support the development of station materials and printing quality
- Printing costs
- Payment to a participatory facilitator (Zine artist)
- Money for a partner(s) to support recruitment/workshop
- Travel costs for research team and participants
- Participation vouchers (£10 Love2Shop voucher per person) to thank participants for their time and insights

The funding did not cover Dr Hayley Bennett (PI) or Dr Morgan Currie (Co-I) work on the project. There was a substantial amount of work absorbed or added to their workloads such as procurement, administration, research design, workshop planning, data collection, analysis, report writing, project management, communication (e.g. website development), knowledge exchange, etc.

We sought to collaborate and align this project with two other projects operating during 2022 in the School of Social and Political Science:

1. [Binks Hub](#)

Based at the University of Edinburgh and Funded by The Binks Trust, the Binks Hub conducts arts-based, participatory research by bringing communities, artists, and academics together as equal partners to share and develop knowledge. The Binks Hub believes participation means collaboratively producing the questions, methods, and dissemination of research. We see artistic and creative methods as essential to this process. This means providing a creative space for our community partners to tell their stories, and thinking broadly about how the arts can inform co-produced research.

2. [Automating Universal Credit](#) (Morgan Currie- PI, Jay Wiggan, Co-I)

An ESRC-funded project on the emergence of automated social services and their effects on claimants through a study of the UK's Universal Credit scheme. Through interviews and document analysis, the project illuminates Universal Credit's wider political context and maps the political

values and policies that inform the system's technical dimensions. Using fieldwork, longitudinal diary studies and user testing workshops, the project also investigate how claimants interact with automated components of Universal Credit and whether automation in social security disparately impacts certain populations.

Steering group

Once funding was awarded, we established a short-term advisory group in early 2021 to connect the project with various other research, policy and advice work taking place in Scotland that focuses on social security, welfare administration, or anti-poverty activities. An initial tweet of the project gained interest from some steering group members, with the project team also drawing on various suitable contacts.

The group includes:

- Órlaith McAree, Senior Participation Manager, Poverty and Inequality Commission
- Marion Davis, Head of Policy and Strategy One Parent Families Scotland
- Kirsty McKechnie, Welfare rights adviser, Early Warning System, Child Poverty Action Group Scotland
- Susan Souter, Reserved Benefits Policy Manager, Scottish Government
- Andrew McNamee, Reserved Benefits Team, Scottish Government
- Helen Robertson, Reserved Benefits Team, Scottish Government
- Amanda Shaw, Reserved Benefits Team, Scottish Government
- Dr Rita Griffiths, Research Fellow, Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath
- Dr Emma Davidson, Lecturer in Social Policy and Qualitative Methods, Binks Hub Co-I, University of Edinburgh
- Fiona McHardy, Research and Insight Manager, Poverty Alliance

We were very grateful for the time and input from these members at various stages of the process.

We also contacted the Department for Work and Pensions, who have asked for our findings on how claimants experience frontline contact via the digital account and job centres. These workshops will feed into these reports for DWP.

Workshop planning

In this section we briefly outline the practical and ethical work involved in establishing the workshops.

The workshop approach centred on the idea of a drop-in space comprised of various stations where we could talk to people in receipt of benefits. We initially sought to hear from 50 people over two days. While we sought to connect to established groups in Edinburgh (eg 'End Poverty Edinburgh' group, Poverty and Inequality Commission, etc.), we were also keen to trial whether the drop-in workshop approach broadens the range of people who engage in social security research. This approach required the research team to find appropriate neighbourhoods and accessible buildings to host the workshops from at least 10am-3pm. We chose to locate the workshops in Edinburgh neighbourhoods (rather than in university, hotel, or event venues in the city centre) to reduce travel costs and inconvenience for participants. We sought to partner with organisations and communities with on-going social security related support groups and advisory services. We included funding in the initial bid to compensate charitable/community partners for their time and support co-developing the workshops, staff time and resources involved in advertising the workshops to users of their services, and fielding questions from community members before and after the workshops.

While these plans were eventually fruitful in terms of being able to deliver the workshops, we experienced a number of challenges in this planning phase (in part due to the project's tight timeline) but also:

1. Finding suitable venues which could offer a large enough space to ensure distancing for a 'drop-in' event of potentially unknown numbers of people (especially in the context of on-going covid-19 concerns and regulations).
2. Finding partners with the staff capacity to support the development of the workshops (again due to covid-19 related illnesses and capacity concerns due to other demands on their services).
3. Securing suitable dates in the most active community centres within our prescribed timeline (e.g. April and May) due to venues being allocated in advance for school holiday clubs, supporting students with additional needs, election days, and various adult education clubs and training sessions.

We made contact with various community centres and support groups which the research team or steering group members had worked with previously, all located in neighbourhoods with relatively large amounts of benefit recipients or '20% most deprived' as described in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation¹¹. We chose to work with two hubs; one in the east of Edinburgh, and the other in the West, consecutively hosting a 1-day workshop, in each and with May being the earliest available slots.

- 12th May, [The Ripple Project](#) (Restalrig, East Edinburgh)
- 13th May, [Space and Broomhouse Hub](#) (Broomhouse, West Edinburgh)

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>

The hubs already ran a number of activities, including popular local cafes, subsidised lunches, various arts and community classes, benefits advice services, etc. The workshops sought to complement these existing activities and access passing footfall.



The flyer is titled "Navigating Digital Welfare" and "Digital Welfare Workshops". It features an illustration of two people, one holding a laptop and the other a tablet. The text includes the following details:

- Workshop 1: Thursday 12 May, 10am-3pm**
The Ripples (www.ripplesproject.co.uk)
198 Restalrig Road South
Edinburgh, EH7 6DZ
- Workshop 2: Friday 13 May, 10am-3pm**
Space & Broomhouse Hub (www.spacescot.org)
79-89 Broomhouse Crescent
Edinburgh, EH11 3RH
- Drop in anytime from 10am-3pm**
- Everyone attending will receive:**
 - Reimbursement for bus travel to venue
 - Free tea, coffee and lunch provided
 - A £10 Love2Shop voucher

The flyer also includes the website www.digitalwelfare.sps.ed.ac.uk and logos for the University of Edinburgh and the School of Social and Political Science.

Ethics

Ethical practice is extremely important in research exploring people's experiences of social security, which may be closely aligned with their experiences of poverty, trauma, family circumstances, disabilities, or precarious employment. We are experienced at undertaking research with people in receipt of social security or working in community settings. Our previous experiences and steering group insights guided our preparations and ethical considerations. While we were not specifically or solely targeting participants who were 'vulnerable', we were aware that it would be naive to assume that no one in receipt of social security who turned up at the workshops would have mental or physical vulnerabilities or would not be experiencing hardship. We were aware that living on a low-income can be a sensitive topic, and unfortunately receiving social security can invoke feelings of shame. Similarly, previous research experience made us aware of the importance of framing how to ask people about their experiences of applying for benefits (which can open up sensitive and personal conversations of traumatic life experiences). As a project team we explicitly discussed the need to give careful consideration to the design of the stations to shape the nature of the conversations (especially in a more open setting than a traditional 1-2-1 interview might take place). Importantly, we committed to being kind and considerate in discussions with participants.

We considered a range of practical and procedural ethical issues. We subsequently applied for (and gained) procedural ethics approval from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science in advance of the workshops. Through this process:

- We produced typical Consent forms and Information Sheets for use on the day.
- We gained consent (signed consent form) on entry to the venue/room: One of the research team greeted people as they arrived and explained the workshop, consent, complete form, etc.
- The advisory group and community hub partners highlighted that some attendees may have reading and writing limitations. Our hub partners agreed to verbally explain the adverts to users they know with such limitations in advance of the workshop. On the day, we verbally explained the consent form, project, and the individual stations to each person providing space and time for questions and queries.
- We staffed each station to reduce dependency on literacy and enable adaptation to ensure attendees could participate.
- Due to the open space format of workshops, we directed conversations towards service experiences (rather than personal issues about experiences of poverty etc).

- We also created an artificial section to offer greater privacy for the photo elicitation interview station (visible in the photos later in this report) where the questions and details were more tightly linked to an individual's experience of Universal Credit.
- Interview transcripts from photo elicitation station were recorded, transcribed, and stored securely. Participants were anonymous throughout this process.
- We provided a table of support material, such as leaflets from all partners, and sign-posting to professional support services in Edinburgh/locality.
- Provided food and drink throughout the day, with seating and space for people to take their time engaging with the activities or considering their participation.
- We anonymised all data gathered during the workshops: it is not necessary or appropriate in this research for people to be identifiable (as the localities were publicly advertised).
- We did not collect photos where attendees' faces were visible.
- Provided post-event communications with the partners and hubs about findings and shared outputs. All outputs are accessible on the webpage.

Types of data produced:

- Creative arts based data, including Zine, postcards, mapping, graffiti wall etc.
- All research findings available the website in the form of visual arts, a methods report, and an accessible zine output.

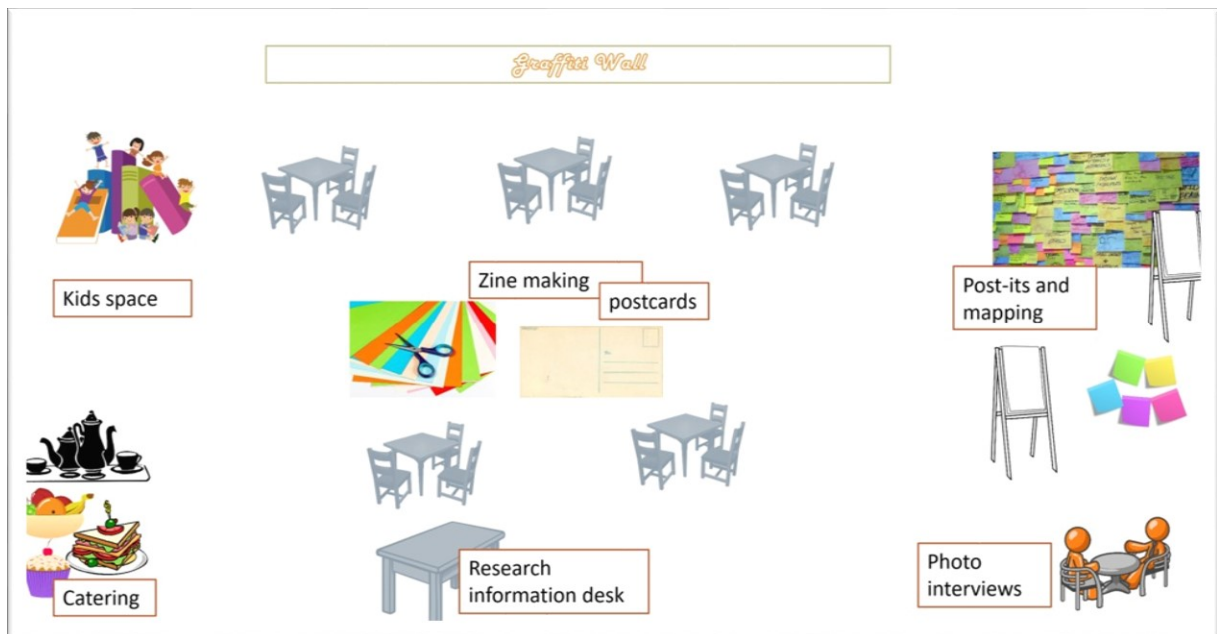
Stations

In this section we discuss the design and delivery of the stations.

We drew on existing research, practice reports, and our own experiences undertaking similar work with different groups or contexts to conceptualise the workshop arrangement, the individual stations, and the overall experience. We designed four stations for the workshops, each with a clear aim and purpose, and centred around a physical object/set-up.

1. Identifying different benefits and sources of support (mapping station)
2. Specific experiences of Universal Credit applications and digital interfaces (photo elicitation)
3. Making a change (zine-making/'postcards to the powerful')
4. Feelings about applying for benefits (graffiti wall)

The intention was for individuals to work their way around the room, taking as long as they needed at different stations, accessing food and drink, and staying in the workshop space for as long as they liked. For those with limited time, the main aim for the researchers was to engage participants in the mapping, and photo elicitation stations (if they received Universal Credit), although the research team placed no pressure on participants who were free to engage however they chose.

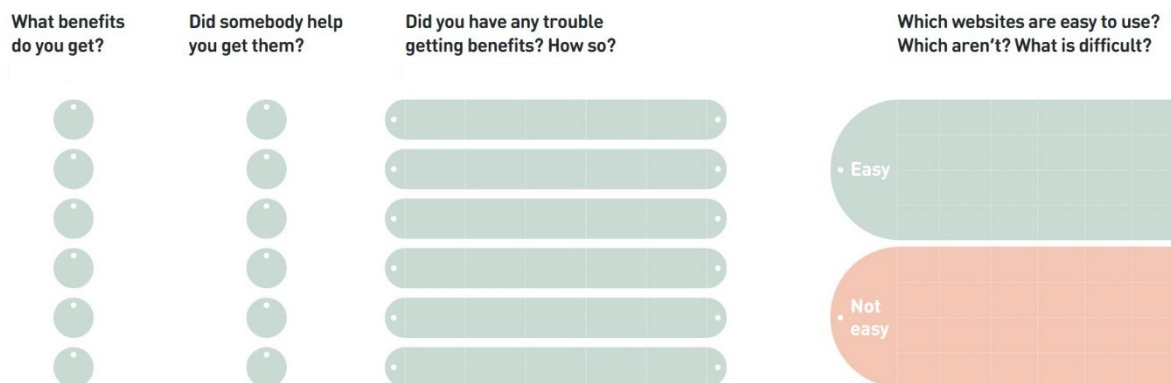


Over two days 40 adults in receipt of multiple benefits attended the drop-in workshops and participated in the stations.

1. Mapping station: Identifying different benefits and sources of support

Our first station used a method we call ‘benefit mapping.’ Mapping in applied social research includes research techniques such as quantitative and qualitative social network mapping, concept mapping, cultural mapping, and perception mapping.¹² Similarly, a range of approaches to mapping underpin deliberative public engagement and community development activities. Mapping techniques seek to support individuals or groups to identify particular services, locations, or activities. This can include a geographical map (which we incorporated, see below) and which Currie had previously utilized in her project ‘The Culture & Communities Mapping Project,’ which researched Edinburgh’s cultural landscapes by asking questions about cultural equity, cultural identity, and the links between geography, sociodemographics, and culture. During the What Works Scotland project (a £5million project exploring public service reform in Scotland 2015-2019), Hayley Bennett and colleagues drew on and adapted a range of facilitation tools, including meta-plans, service mapping, carousels, and various post-its note interactions, to gather information from diverse public sector workers about service provision, experiences, and understandings of social issues¹³.

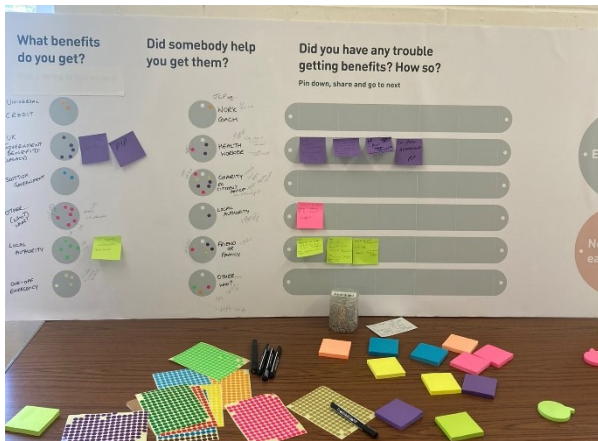
Adapting the approach for an exploration of the complexity and multitude of benefits, support services (both formal and informal), and associated administrative experiences led to the creation of A0 physical wall using coloured dots and post-its (aligned to specific benefits), and a series of columns that participants would work across. This approach offered us an interactive station, based on a series of open questions, whereby individuals and groups (i.e. friends or family who chose to stick together) could collectively discuss the types of benefits they apply for and their experiences.



It helped attendees to identify support and also engage with the prompts provided by previous respondents. For example, the facilitator asked the attendee if they received any help for their applications and who from, with follow up prompts such as “others have mentioned GP or health workers, would that apply to you?” Often this would prompt a memory: “actually, yes it was a mental health worker who initially suggested I apply for XYZ”. The mapping tool worked well as a way to contain the conversations about support processes and needs.

¹² E.g. Striepe, M. (2016) ‘Using Concept Mapping to Capture Faith-Based School Leaders’ Perspectives of Leadership’ SAGE Research Methods Cases Part 2

¹³ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/>



In practice, this was an active station, unearthing lots of information about various benefits and support services, and required constant facilitation. The facilitator had to capture participant's comments and experiences on post-its during conversations with attendees and be very familiar with various administrative processes, jargon, acronyms, etc., demonstrating the expertise of participants in understanding administrative processes and bureaucratic language. This depth of detail meant that only 1 researcher could staff this station, and the post-

its reflect the jargon heavy nature of benefit application and administration.

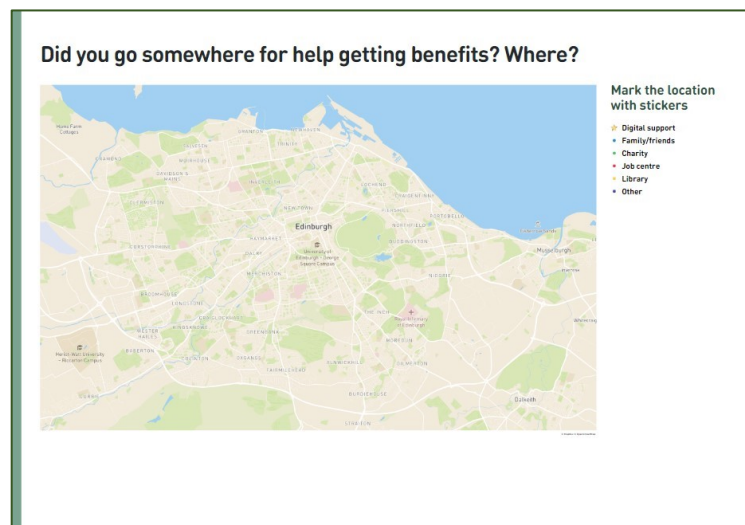


We did not audio record the conversations at this station. This means we did not capture the richness of some of the discussion where people explained in detail how they had applied for something and the support they received.

The interactive board was an attractive focus for the facilitator and respondent to talk about difficult times or stressful application processes; it directed conversations and created a well-defined purpose to the conversation and

interaction. Participants could see the connections being made, and also question the researchers' documenting process ("I wouldn't say the GP helped as such, they just told me I might get benefits, so that's not worth a dot to me"... "Yes now I think about it, my mother filled in the forms first and pushed the worker to help me. She deserves a dot").

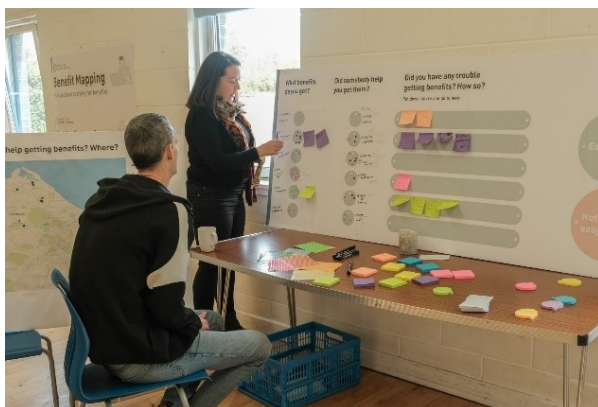
We also produced a large (A0) physical map of Edinburgh where participants could dot the locations of specific services, charities, etc that they had sought help from. The majority of these dots represented somewhat local (neighbourhood, or bordering neighbourhood) charities and welfare rights centres with deep expertise of benefit applications, debt advice, housing rights, and appeals.



If we were to use this approach again, we'd consider having two facilitators, one supporting the mapping and the other watching and listening to capture the detail of the conversations. The facilitator supporting the mapping needs to engage in active listening and 'give people space to tell their story in their own words' (Faulkner, no date, p.14).¹⁴ The station would not necessarily need audio recording as it would be difficult to transcribe, but at busy times it was not possible for the sole facilitator to take additional notes and make reflections during or after conversations at this station. Such notes would have provided rich details of various experiences, bureaucratic processes and viewpoints.

The analytical process for this type of interaction is complex. The populated board represents a co-produced analysis where the participants shaped how their individual discussions are recorded and where they are placed on the board. Post-event, an analytical process is required for the collective experiences. We initially collated the findings under the board's key headings and themes, and then identified dominant themes and issues relating to particular benefits and experiences applying for multiple benefits.

One possible development for future use would be to assign each participant with a number that is used on all their related dots so that it is possible to bring together their complex individual experiences, as well as the overall community experiences.



¹⁴ Faulkner, W. (no date) "Dialogue in Public Engagement: A Handbook" Edinburgh Beltane.

2. Photo Elicitation: Specific experiences of digital interfaces and automated benefits

The second station we developed centred on a method known as photo elicitation (PE), an approach which can trigger deeper and more detailed responses than a purely verbal interview (Rose, 2016; Copes et al., 2018)¹⁵. While there are a number of ways of using photos in interviews, PE commonly involves participants producing their own images of a particular topic before sharing these with the researcher and explaining their images in an interview. As illustrated in a research project with methamphetamine users in Alabama (Copes et al., 2018), PE can help researchers to gain an understanding of spaces and situations they cannot readily observe themselves, while also empowering vulnerable research participants by giving them control over what they share with the researcher. Closer to our own topic, PE has been used to explore formerly homeless individuals' experiences of UC and thus make more visible the experiences of a typically marginalised group (De Oliveira, 2022)¹⁶.

PE can, however, be more time consuming than a verbal interview because it usually requires an initial discussion and a need to develop a research relationships with the participant to explain the photo gathering process, then leaving them a period of days or weeks to take the photos before finally arranging an interview with the researcher (Rose, 2016)¹⁷. There are also additional ethical challenges with PE interviews, not least related to the use of participant-generated images by researchers and the need to gain informed consent as well as copyright consent to sharing participant-generated images in research outputs (Copes et al., 2018).

Our project aimed to trial how researchers might adapt the PE interview approach in combination with drop-in research workshops to understanding experiences of claiming and managing UC using online platforms. The intention was for the participants' photos to shape the interview questions during the workshops. We were particularly interested in the day-to-day experiences of managing UC and thought that PE might capture this quotidian experience by encouraging participants to share images of, for example, local places where they received UC support, or of management strategies that took place in domestic settings which we could not observe.

We planned to ask three to five participants to take and share with us 10-15 images of their experiences of UC in advance of our workshops. We hoped to use the participant-generated images to co-produce the purpose and interactions at the PE interview station at our workshops, in combination with researcher-generated images. In addition, the participant-generated images were to be used as standalone visual data about experiences of UC and displayed on our website and in the project report.

¹⁵ Copes, H. et al. (2018) 'Photo-Elicitation Interviews with Vulnerable Populations: Practical and Ethical Considerations', *Deviant Behavior*, 39(4), pp. 475–494.

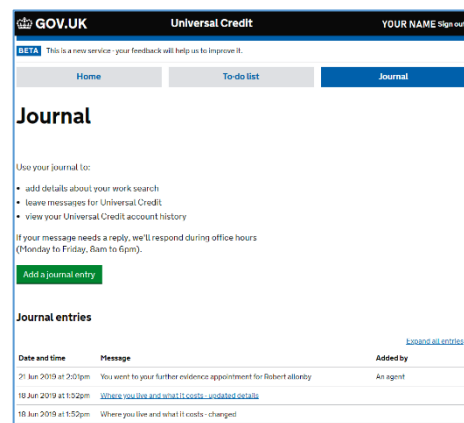
¹⁶ De Oliveira, B.B. (2022) 'A photoelicitation exploration on formally homeless people experience with Universal Credit: System error and "the government don't care"', *Journal of Community Psychology*

¹⁷ Rose, G. (2016) *Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*. 4th edition. London: SAGE

We attempted to recruit participants to the photo gathering research via partner organisations, and received initially positive responses. However, we ultimately struggled to transform this initial interest into recruitment within the project timelines and were only able to engage with one potential participant. Although this participant was keen to engage at first, they did not respond to a subsequent email with further instructions about the project and it was decided due to tight timelines and for ethical reasons that it was not appropriate to chase the participant.

On reflection the complication of setting up a PE activity through a partner organisation and via email may have been too complex to be attractive to potential participants in our limited research period. While we were conscious of the paradox of a project investigating digital welfare that itself required digital competencies from participants, some digital proficiency and online access was nonetheless required for participants to complete the research consent form via email and send us their photos. It is possible this was a barrier for some potential participants. In hindsight it might have been more effective to recruit participants for the photo gathering exercise in-person at the community centres that we would later return to for the workshops, and therefore explain the project in person. One reason we did not consider this was due to lingering concerns in the early phase of the research about face-to-face research during Covid-19, and the aforementioned difficulties confirming hub dates and locations for the workshops in good time.

We adapted the methods to the workshop context. Although we were not able to use participant-generated images, a PE interview station using researcher-generated images formed part of our workshops and was very successful. The research team selected 28 images of: local places and organisations that provide UC support; screenshots of the UC interface and DWP communications; and tools used to access and apply for UC e.g. mobile phone, laptop. The local images were tailored to each workshop site. Images were printed A5 and laminated in-house which kept costs low. We also engaged with DWP employees who also sent us some images of aspects of UC they were interested in feedback on.



During the workshops all the images were attached in a random order to a vertical display board which doubled as a privacy screen for the interviews. Participants were asked to select 2-3 images and bring them to the interview table. In a couple of instances, participants had small children with them who could join in the interview by pulling the images off the board.



We developed and used an interview schedule to guide the conversation. The first question asked the participant to explain why they had chosen their photos. Follow up prompts were then used to cover the interview schedule topics with some additional questions asked from the schedule. The topics covered how participants had claimed UC and their ongoing communications with the jobcentre, their confidence and understanding of how payments were calculated (including automated processes), any help or advice they had received in claiming UC, and their awareness and use of Scottish Choices. There were also questions related to split payments and claiming childcare costs. This was the only station where we audio recorded the interviews and transcribed and coded the recordings after the events.

The use of our PE method resulted in rich interviews, despite the conversations lasting approximately fifteen minutes. The photos were an effective ice breaker to begin the interviews, while also helping to focus the interviews by prompting interviewees on topics of shared interest. The images signalled to interviewees that the interviewer was familiar with UC and the local landscape which may have helped to make interviewees more forthcoming. In addition, by selecting their photos themselves, participants guided the interview to some extent towards topics they felt were important which may have been why the interviews were so detailed and at times emotional, despite their short duration. The technique did therefore seem to achieve the more emotional responses associated with PE interviews compared to purely verbal interviews (Rose, 2016; Copes et al., 2018). The photos also helped to support conversations about potentially complex parts of UC to explain, such as a screenshot from a CPAG information page to prompt our questions about Scottish Choices.

During the workshop the display of photos helped to create a visually engaging workshop space, and at times was also a useful distraction for participants' children. The set up made the interview station appear more informal and perhaps less intimidating than an interview without this visual element. Having a visual and participatory aspect also helped the interview station to feel more aligned with the other, more creative workshop stations. Nonetheless it is possible that the selection of photos negatively limited participants in what they told us: for example, there were possibly other organisations or places that were important to their UC experience that were not mentioned because there weren't represented in our chosen images (indeed many participants identified these

organisations during the mapping station task). On the other hand there were possibly also too many images for participants to choose from which might have been overwhelming. Most of the images were not picked at all, with participants clustering in selecting the UC text message image and a screenshot of the UC journal showing the monthly payment amount. A smaller selection of photos, perhaps 10-20, might have been more manageable for participants to engage with.

Although we were not able to fully test the PE interview method with our workshops as intended, there were useful insights from our adapted method. Participatory methods do require time and resources to establish, and this can be challenging in short term or pilot projects such as this. Nonetheless, using a visual element in the interviews and allowing participants to shape the interview in some way through their selection of photos did seem to lead to rich and detailed interviews, even in a short period of time. With further iterations, we would recommend using this PE interview approach as part of participatory research workshops. The method could be tested in future with a smaller number of photos for participants to choose from. In future we would also like the opportunity to try again to test our original PE interview plan to produce participant-generated images of UC experiences, with more time and resource to dedicate to setting up the photo gathering exercise.



3. Zine making and postcards to the powerful: Making a change

Our third station was used for zine making. Zines are self-published, amateur publications, originally print-based and sold non-commercially at places like zine fairs, music shows and local cafes, though now also distributed digitally. DIY zines are directly democratic in that most anyone with a stapler, scissors and glue can make one – as the primary aesthetic incorporates drawing, text and collage out of cheap repurposed materials, assembled and circulated at little cost.



Zines call to attention their own materiality – they communicate their meaning not just with words but with their imagery, the choice of print materials, their formatting and mode of circulation among a particular community. French and Curd (2022)¹⁸ call them ‘little stories’ that convey in insider-ness, and marginality by capturing under-represented, highly-personal perspectives. Stephen Duncombe’s book *Notes from underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture*¹⁹ chronicles zines’ ascendance within 80s and 90s underground cultures in music and the artworld and in feminist, anarchist and queer movements, where they appealed to anti-establishment agendas against the corporate capture of expression.

Academics such as Duncombe (1997) have studied zine making as a form of expression for various groups and subcultures, but researchers have also taken up zine making as a visual method in its own right. Researchers have used zines as part of ethnographic and participatory research exploring geographic and institutional power relations,²⁰ and zines as a methodology can also offer researchers a way to reflect on their own dynamics with research subjects. Zine making is an accessible way to involve communities in the research process and outputs, since they can be assembled by multiple authors and don’t require particular skills. Zines also take a form that can circulate research findings to general audiences beyond the academy (Valli 2021; Atalay, 2019)^{21,22}.

At our zine-making station, which we called the ‘postcards to the powerful’ station, artist Jean McEwan drew on a widely-used zine aesthetic of the punk cut-and-paste collage comprised of found images, ephemera and texts in varied typefaces. Jean’s table offered cut-outs of images and words

¹⁸ French, J. and Curd, E. (2022) "Zining as artful method: facilitating zines as participatory action research within art museums." *Action Research* 20.1 (2022): 77-95.

¹⁹ Duncombe, S. (1997) *Notes from underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture*. Verso.

²⁰ For instance, French and Curd set up zine making workshops as part of participatory action research looking at the power relations between museums, galleries, curators and patrons, and Valli used zines to explore gentrification in Bushwick, NY.

²¹ Valli, C. (2021) *Participatory dissemination: bridging in-depth interviews, participation, and creative visual methods through Interview-Based Zine-Making (IBZM)*. Fennia

²² Atalay, S, et al (2019). "Ethno/Graphic storytelling: Communicating research and exploring pedagogical approaches through graphic narratives, drawings, and zines." *American Anthropologist* 121.3 (2019): 769-772.

related to welfare, government, surveillance and family, along with pens, scissors, and glue, and she invited participants to sit and assemble materials onto a page that expressed how claiming welfare benefits makes them feel. Participants used traditional zine making methods to create their own postcards sharing experiences and images. Several people brought their children along to the workshop, and the children were drawn to the station with its bright pieces of paper and markers. As people worked, Jean asked them to describe what they were creating and captured their sentiments in hand-written notes she later transcribed.



 Navigating Digital Welfare

Postcards to the Powerful

Write a postcard to those creating and managing online application processes.

What do you want changed?

What do you want those in power to know about your experiences?

Ideas will be compiled into a 'zine' of everyone's ideas.



Post event, Jean collated and scanned all the postcards, and then created a 'master zine' including the transcribed quotes and data from some of the other stations.

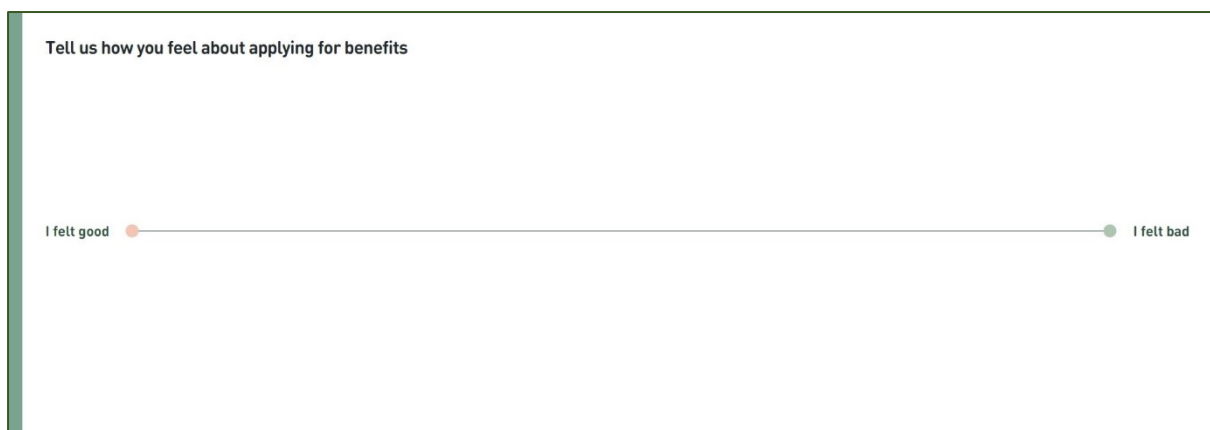
This was an effective station in the workshop setting, creating a community and comfort with the issues being discussed. It also offered a practical solutions focus and an interest in participants' views of what changes are needed in benefit administration.



4. Graffiti wall: Sharing feelings about applying for benefits

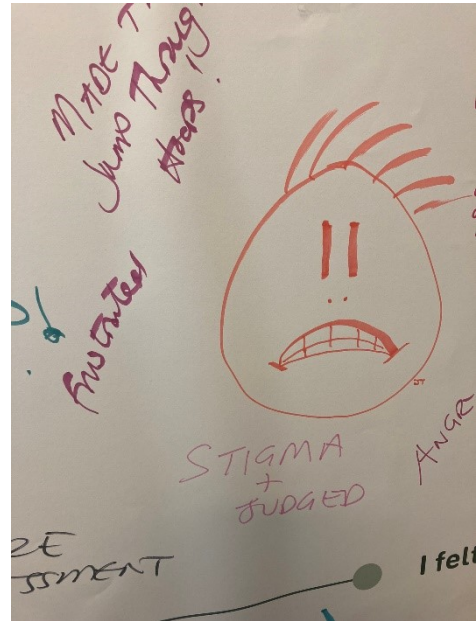
Our fourth station employed a 'graffiti wall' approach with the aim of providing a space whereby participants could focus on their feelings towards applying for different benefits. Social researchers use graffiti walls in multifarious ways, and just as there is no strictly structured practice of making and displaying graffiti art on the walls of a city, there is no strictly codified way to use a graffiti wall in research practice²³. Researchers note the potential of graffiti to act as an artistic and communication language for the marginalised. In being less formalised and welcoming a mixture of text, image, and freeform expression, it reduces perceived barriers in the form of any need for verbal eloquence, artistic ability, or extended time commitment that potential participants might have presumed. We included it in the workshops to provide an option for expression and the sharing of views and feelings. It also, importantly, provided an option for participation which required only the most minimal interaction with the research team and acted as a potential 'holding station' for when the mapping and interview stations were occupied.

Having the above in mind meant that we were able to approach the graffiti wall in an experimental manner. In short, we were not relying on it for the kinds of quotes, narratives or outputs that the other stations were designed to deliver, and instead we decided to experiment with its potential efficacy as a means for participants to freely express feelings and emotions regarding their experiences with the welfare system. With this understanding we might have opted to simply mount a large field of paper on a wall and leave some marker pens, post-it notes and stickers nearby, and simply invited people to do whatever they wished with it. However, we were concerned that a blank sheet might be intimidating, that people might feel confused and alienated, and that it may therefore serve to restrict rather than encourage free expression. We therefore decided in advance to print a large foam-backed sheet three metres long by one metre high, with a double ended arrow running the length and simple prompts to express positive feelings towards the left and negative to the right.

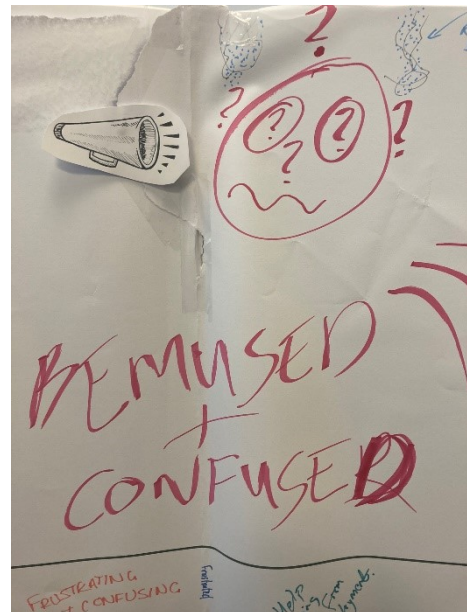


²³ See Emmison, M., & Smith, P. (2007). *Researching the visual*. SAGE Publications

After arriving at the first workshop we then felt it would help to add some quick doodles ourselves in order to make it clear what kind of additions people could make to the wall. The wall was then attended by one of our team through the length of the workshop, with the emphasis being on briefing people as to the purpose and intention, and then leaving them to express themselves without us directing the process, other than if such a request was made. Most people who did participate were low on available time to commit, and our priority was to use the time they could give in the other stations where we were collecting deeper insights and views. Whilst text and images were added to the wall the main focus of the team was on encouraging and supporting participants' engagement with the other stations. If the project had ended at this stage then the graffiti wall would have contributed little to data collection, and it would not have been possible to rely on it for research material for meaningful analysis. However, it offered a useful interactive station for the workshop as a whole, and also a clear space for people to share feelings (thus enabling the other stations to have specific focus on specific bureaucratic experiences).



The second workshop was much busier than the first workshop. This meant a considerable increase in the number of participants at the three main stations, a large number of whom were mothers of young children. Many of these mothers participated in the research and we found that the graffiti wall and an overspill table at the zine station served as an effective way of occupying the children and freeing their mothers for the lengthier and more concentration-heavy stations. By the end of the afternoon children's contributions complimented the adult contributions, and reflected the children's creative pursuits. As we approached this workshop in an experimental way, we can say that it actually served a valuable function in the research space. As a means to enable other more time, labour and concentration intensive methods we would consider using a graffiti wall in future. It required relatively little researcher time or attention, and complimented the other stations that sought to produce more traditional qualitative data.



Conclusion

This methods report seeks to provide some insight into a pilot project exploring how drop-in workshops comprised of four designed interactive stations might function as a way to collect data on people's experiences of benefit administration.

This report outlines the practical and ethical considerations, as well as the design of four stations: mapping, photo elicitation, graffiti wall, and zine making/postcards to the powerful. We reflect on the process of designing and using these approaches, as well as ways in which we would improve or adapt the methods in future research.

Some key issues we would like to flag to researchers and others seeking to use a drop-in and interactive workshop approach:

- **The importance of design:** This helps ensure the data collection methods can be appropriately converted into interactive materials. Using a designer and including the funds for this work in grants is essential. Design made the stations accessible and structured the way people participated and data was collected
- **Community Partners:** Having community partners who can host a space and offers a place that people are comfortable in or familiar with. This means including appropriate compensation for community partners. We did not just rent a space from them, but we compensated them for their time and energy advertising the event and explaining the purpose of the workshops to the community in advance.
- **Drop-in 'success' varies:** The drop-in approach was more successful in one location than the other. The research team in both locations went out into the community to provide leaflets and chat about the workshops to encourage people to drop-in. We found drop-in to be a good way to engage with people who might not normally engage with research projects, with little inconvenience to their day (especially if they were visiting the community centre anyway). The draw back for researchers is that you are not guaranteed participants. In our view, it is best to plan workshops to coincide with other events in the community.
- **All stations were effective, but in different ways.** Need to think not only about data collection stations, but also the range of outputs, the nature of interactions, and the holistic atmosphere of the space. For example, the Postcards to the Powerful station (Zine making) creates a tangible, easy to circulate output for the community as well as an informal, creative space for people to engage with the workshop space. The interview and mapping stations allowed us to collect more traditional research data. While the graffiti wall was not good for data collection it did act as an ice breaker and artistic outlet for people to share their feelings.
- **Over-staff:** By this we mean ensure that you have staff at each station, someone to greet as people pop their heads in to see if it is for them, and if researchers need to stand outside to direct people in, then additional staff to ensure safety etc. Extra staff also provides space and time for note taking and additional data collection, or informal conversations with participants.

Appendix 1

Image number	Image description	Number of times selected
	Places & organisations providing support & information	
1	Wester Hailes library	0
6	Piershill Library	0
7	High Riggs Jobcentre	0
11	Wester Hailes Healthy Living Centre	0
14	Leith library	0
25	Citizens Advice Edinburgh logo	2 (Int3, Int4)
27	Leith jobcentre	1 (Int2)
26	CHAI logo	2 (Int2, Int3)
33	Screenshot of CPAG information page on Scottish Choices. [not displayed; used by researcher as a prompt to accompany interview question]	NA
5	Screenshot of Universal Credit Facebook group	0
	Benefit websites and interfaces	
15	Screenshot of UC journal	0
16	Screenshot of letter from UC regarding overpayment	0
17	Screenshot of UC journal messages	0
18	Screenshot of UC commitment acceptance	2 (Int2, Int6)
19	Screenshot of UC To do list	0
21	Screenshot of mygovscot account login place	1 (Int2)
23	Screenshot of UC account sign in page	2 (Int2, Int6)
28	Screenshot of text message informing of need to read message in UC journal.	5 (Int1, Int2, Int5, Int6, Int8)
3	Screenshot of UC journal showing monthly payment amount	4 (Int2, Int5, Int6, Int8)
	Tools used to access and apply for UC e.g. mobile phone, laptop.	
2	Stock image of paper calendar	0
4	Stock image of laptop	1 (Int7)
8	Stock image of landline phone	1 (Int7)
9	Stock image of letters on doormat	1 (Int1)
10	Stock image of mug of tea	0
11	Stock image of mobile phone	2 (Int1, Int5)
12	Free Wifi Zone symbol	0
20	Screenshot of 'No internet' error message	0
22	Stock image of public computer in library	0