

WAVE ONE, MAY 2024

DEMOS

“THIS SYSTEM IS RIGGED”

A SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING EXPLORATION
REVEALING HOW PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT
POVERTY ONLINE

SOPHIA KNIGHT
HANNAH PERRY
ALICE DAWSON

with support from
JACK PAY



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15 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2DD
T: 020 3878 3955
hello@demos.co.uk
www.demos.co.uk

ABOUT DEMOS



Demos is a cross-party think tank putting people at the heart of policy-making to create bold ideas and a more collaborative democracy.

This project is part of our work on how to build a *Trusted Political System*, through listening to the voices of those most impacted by policy. In partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, we have developed an innovative method of social media listening to shed light on the experiences of people living in financial hardship.

We will also use these insights to inform our work on Public Service reform, by understanding the experiences of those who rely on these services. Our goal is to enable more relational public services, that can empower communities and prevent problems.



JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is an independent social change organisation, working to support and speed up the transition to a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, where people and planet can flourish.

At JRF we are currently developing an insight infrastructure which, powered by quantitative and qualitative data, will act as a satnav providing a series of possible routes to navigate from problem to solution. Such routes will be paved by data and insights generated through triangulation of data from different sources – established datasets (admin data); new sources (charity data); experimental data products (placebased insight hubs, banking data, consumer data); and lived experience of people (experiential insight, social listening). Data and insights products, which we will generate and disseminate in open collaboration with others, are going to support and sustain a shared movement

promoting innovation, better use of evidence, and data-driven decisions to solve social and economic inequality in the UK.

One of the key aspects of the foundation's insight infrastructure's proposition is to improve our knowledge and understanding of people and communities experiencing hardship, poverty and related issues, in the public and policy debate at a national/regional/local level, on issues they have identified themselves. In this instance, by learning what people share about their experience on social media so to investigate how we can generate and disseminate new and timely insights into the lives of those with direct experience of the issues we care about.

Rosario Piazza, Chief Insight Architect, JRF

Aleks Collingwood, Partnership Insight Manager, JRF

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This report was designed to **shed light on the experiences of people living in financial hardship**, through analysis of discussions in specific online support spaces. It is the first installment of a series of four waves, which will provide a regular 'dip in' to the online conversation, to pick up salient and emerging insights on poverty and inequality over the course of 2024.

Our analysis consisted of a combination of inductive computational techniques, which allowed us to surface characteristic terms, phrases and discussions occurring across the dataset. We have visualised the outputs of this step into a series of word clouds, which we will be able to compare across the waves to see overarching trends and fluctuations relating to the experiences of and conversations about poverty. The quotes throughout are drawn from our subsequent qualitative analysis, through which we gained a more fine-grained understanding of how individuals are feeling and responding to their experiences.

This method has the advantage of giving us a replicable basis for comparison across each of our waves, while not sacrificing the deeper understanding which is gained from directly engaging with the voices of those with lived experience of hardship.

All quotes throughout this report have been bowdlerised and are indicative of the content of the post rather than verbatim - i.e. the meaning of the post has been preserved but wording or syntax changed. This is so that the author cannot be identified via text matching. Though we cannot know for certain the circumstances of any individual anonymous contributor, we know from both desk research and engagement with the Grassroots Poverty Action Group that these are spaces where individuals experiencing poverty may share their stories or seek help.

Please see the Appendix for full details about our methodology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was funded by and developed in partnership with Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

We are grateful to CASM Technology for their support with technical infrastructure and to the members of JRF's Grassroots Poverty Action Group (GPAG) for their guidance and input.



JRF's Grassroots Poverty Action Group (GPAG) is made up of 14 people with direct experience of poverty from across the UK. Members of the group include people who are most impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, including people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, lone parents, Universal Credit claimants, disabled people and unpaid carers – those most at risk of poverty.

The group works on, and supports, a variety of JRF's research and infrastructure projects. Group members bring their experience of living on a low-income but also the skills, knowledge, and experience they may have from employment, voluntary work, caring responsibilities, and community activism.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS - 1/2

There are three areas of consistency in this wave (Nov 2023 - Jan 2024) with the previous wave of the research (May - July 2023).

1 CHALLENGES NAVIGATING SERVICES

People found services stressful and difficult to navigate, to the point where some questioned if it was deliberate.

A wide range of often very detailed advice was shared by other members of forums, including links to charities and other support organisations.

2 IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY

Financial precarity and relationship breakdown formed a vicious cycle, with divorce and custody battles often aggravating already precarious economic circumstances.

Many were struggling specifically with the costs of having children and raising a family, with limited ability to access support.

3 EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

There was a significant overlap between general emotional distress caused by instability and hardship, with specific mental health challenges. Financial instability and mental health challenges formed another negative feedback loop.

KEY FINDINGS - 2/2

There are two new themes emerging in this wave (Nov 2023 - Jan 2024) that were less prominent in the earlier waves (May - July 2023).

1 CHALLENGES SURROUNDING ENERGY AND HOUSING BILLS

Mortgage increases, substandard rented accommodation, inability to afford energy bills and the risk of homelessness were all more prominent themes than in our previous project.

NB: As the previous iteration of the project was a pilot, the methodologies are slightly different. In the following waves of the projects, we will be able to directly quantitatively compare the findings between each wave.

2 LOW TRUST IN NATIONAL POLITICS

- High-profile incidents including the Post Office and Contaminated Blood scandal have further damaged trust
- The Data Protection and Digital Information Bill is being viewed with suspicion in this context
- Local councillors and MPs are sometimes suggested as sources of support, but national politics is often seen as hostile and unhelpful for those experiencing poverty
- Many people feel shame or anger at the stereotypical portrayal of disabled individuals and those living in poverty by the media and politicians



BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In 2023, Demos and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation collaborated on an exploratory pilot project to investigate:

- *What can we learn from social media about people's experiences of poverty and hardship in the UK?*
- *How can these learnings be scaled or tested in the future?*

Following a successful trial, we have extended this work into a year long programme consisting of four 'waves'. Over the course of 2024, we will take periodic samples of the online conversation to track how people are talking about their experiences, and what insights social media listening can support for better policy development which puts people's needs and lived experience at its heart.

In this deck, we present findings from Wave One of our extended investigation, as well as updates to our methodology for gathering social media insights in this area.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from all posts and comments between 1st November 2023 and 31st January 2024 (total = 13,882). We gathered data from 5 forums, which we narrowed down to relevant subforums. We have referred to these throughout the slides using the following pseudonyms:

- **DisabilityHelp (4,420 posts)** - A forum dedicated to supporting individuals with disabilities.
- 4 subforums relating to the intersection of disability, government services and financial hardship
- **FamilyHelp (72 posts)** - A forum dedicated to supporting families.
- 3 subforums relating to government services and financial support for families

- **FinancialHelp (2,189 posts)** - A forum focused on providing financial advice and support.
- 6 subforums discussing the intersection of finances with family, disability and employment
- **GovernmentHelp (7,088 posts)** - A group on a large social media site which was related to people interacting with government services.
- **MentalHealthHelp (313 posts)** - A forum providing mental health support.
- 1 subforum related to financial hardship



OUR FINDINGS

KEY THEMES

Across the data set as a whole, we identified a number of key themes across the 5 forums we analysed. The numbers in brackets demonstrate the proportion of our dataset that each theme represents.

- 1. Serious challenges navigating the system of service provision** (5,298 posts / 38% of dataset)
- 2. Relationships and family life are negatively affected by financial pressures** (2,345 posts / 17% of our dataset)
- 3. Emotional and psychological distress as a result of hardship** - the language of mental and physical health was prominent (2231 posts / 16% of data set)

with language of negative emotions overlaid (2,047 posts/ 15% of dataset)

- 4. Many discussed the challenges of unstable living conditions** (944 posts / 7% of our dataset)
- 5. Distrust in politics and political figures was widespread** (541 posts / 4% of our dataset)

As this is the first in a four wave study where we intend to use a consistent methodology, in future waves, we will be able to demonstrate exact shifts in the proportion of the conversation reflected by these themes over time.

1. PEOPLE FACE SERIOUS CHALLENGES NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM OF SERVICE PROVISION

This first theme reflected the largest portion of conversations in the forum - 38% of our dataset.

KEY TERMS USED

We found many terms which referenced specific benefits and government-funded support services.

- Language that refers to specifically-named benefits such as Universal credit, LCWRA, DLA and PIP came up very frequently
- Entities that are responsible for administering these benefits were also repeatedly mentioned, particularly in the context of frustration due to

inability to access the right kinds of support, or experiencing poor treatment from service providers

KEY INSIGHTS

- Some questioned if the difficulty was deliberate, to disincentivize seeking support ([P. 17](#))
- A wide range of detailed advice was shared by users, including links to charities ([P. 18 - 19](#))

SOME QUESTIONED IF THE DIFFICULTY WAS DELIBERATE, TO DISINCENTIVIZE SEEKING SUPPORT

People found services stressful and difficult to navigate, to the point where some questioned if it was deliberate.

Negative sentiment towards Government-funded support services spanned from first-hand accounts of negative interactions, to more emotional venting.



These communication issues with PIP for those with hearing loss need to be sorted! We have got a place that call itself a Disability Service Centre that those with 1 of the most profound disabilities cannot use! It is the equivalent of Assessment Centres with no wheelchair access [...] PIP is biased towards some & against other conditions.

*[Restart] seems so disorganised & yet these ppl have the power to report to Jobcentre & potentially have people's benefits sanctioned? No way it is an absolute joke. They have not done anything for me, I do not see the point it is a complete waste of time & goverment money funding these ppl!! [...] Just p*ssed off that I followed what they told me to do [...] appears that they are just liars & trying to leave me in the sh*t with my kids. What are they gaining from this? Trying to cover up their sh*tty service and failings by blaming the claimant?*

A WIDE RANGE OF DETAILED ADVICE WAS SHARED BY USERS, INCLUDING LINKS TO CHARITIES

Online forums are very active in supporting people and offering advice. Users were able to share detailed accounts of their circumstances and receive personalised advice from other members of the forums.

While some users responded to questions with direct advice, many also signposted to other support services who could provide more information, such as Citizens Advice.

Many other posts and replies linked to official sources of information, both to provide information and to critique official policies.

The information that people share is greatly appreciated by other users, who speak about the value of the forums.

I am really grateful for anyone who has offered me support, understanding or advice for my situation this year since joining the group. I might not be further ahead but I am not feeling so alone in some of the difficulty I am experiencing. [...] I do not have a great support network & it means a lot to have a space to talk about these issues and hear that I am not the only one or that there is something else I can try

A WIDE RANGE OF DETAILED ADVICE WAS SHARED BY USERS, INCLUDING LINKS TO CHARITIES

Users responding to posts seeking advice frequently shared external links to information and resources, from both government and charities.

GOV.UK pages related to changes to benefits, Universal Credit, and the Work Capability Assessment were linked to most frequently, but several related charitable resources such as a [Benefits Calculator](#) were also shared frequently.

Other organisations commonly linked to included [Benefits and Work](#), [Advice Local](#), [Citizens Advice](#), [Disability Rights UK](#) and [Care for Carers](#).

Many forums contained dedicated internal Wiki pages, allowing users to consolidate useful links and frequently asked questions related to Benefit Rate Increases, the Restart scheme, Migration to Universal Credit and Cost of Living Payments.

2. RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY LIFE ARE NEGATIVELY IMPACTED BY FINANCIAL PRESSURES

This second theme reflected the second-largest portion of conversations in the forum - 17% of our dataset.

KEY TERMS USED

Throughout conversations across the respective fora, we found a range of terms which referenced relationships and family.

- Language that refers to current or former romantic relationships - *Partner, wife, hubby, fiance, ex* - came up frequently
- Many individuals also discussed the impact of financial pressures on their immediate family members, particularly their children. This included difficulties with the cost of childcare, as well as the expenses associated with raising children more broadly

- Many parents felt shame or guilt when struggling to afford child-related expenses

KEY INSIGHTS

- Relationship breakdown exacerbates existing financial struggles ([p. 22](#))
- Vicious cycles of financial precarity and stress to relationships ([p. 23 - 24](#))
- Struggling with the costs of raising a family ([p. 25 - 26](#))

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN EXACERBATES EXISTING FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

There was significant overlap between relationships and other key themes, especially interactions with the system.

Many were struggling with disputes over custody and child support in the event of relationship breakdown, as well as navigating changes to Universal Credit and other government support.

It is such a mess and all came out of the blue. If it was just the mortgage I could have afforded it but I took out loans for a new car [...] :(I feel totally screwed over! This house is in both our names majority of bills are joint too. [...] It is definitely one hundred percent over, cheating is unforgivable.[...] In five years I can buy him out but right now I cannot do that [...] I need him to continue paying what he pays now to make sure I don't get into financial difficulty

Who's name are the house and mortgage in - 1 of them or joint? Was there any agreement set up wrt deposit, equity etc when you bought? Your partner will have to pay child maintenance, it depends on the proportion of time that the kids are with each parent. But expecting him to keep paying the mortgage for an indefinite length of time, when he's having to rent, or buy a place for himself, [...] is not realistic. You'll need to financially separate at some point, generally speaking the sooner the better. [...] selling up and downsizing or renting is probably the way you'll have to go.

VICIOUS CYCLES OF FINANCIAL PRECARITY AND STRESS TO RELATIONSHIPS

Financial precarity and relationship breakdown formed a vicious cycle, with divorce and custody battles often aggravating already precarious economic circumstances.

We found multiple discussions relating to the impact of dealing with financial stresses and navigating institutional support systems on romantic and family relationships, across varying levels of severity.



I think they'll understand considering what is happening & you're worried about your baby. They just need you to get your claim updated & make a joint claim ASAP. They'll need you to report living with your partner on your claim, then you & your partner will make a claim as a couple including new baby. Try to get this done ASAP so you can be paid correctly

VICIOUS CYCLES OF FINANCIAL PRECARITY AND STRESS TO RELATIONSHIPS

Financial difficulties led to or exacerbated many other challenges, including abuse.

In the most extreme cases, individuals found themselves in acute mental distress.

*Been reported for benefit fraud please help! Ex-partner has made a maliciously made a false report to the fraud line about me. I am on UC and PIP. He is an abusive man and has almost destroyed me emotionally. He said that I am getting PIP but am not disabled [...] and that I have a huge amount of savings I have not declared. I am so scared. What will happen next? **Mental health is rock-bottom now.** A friend told me the fraud team would investigate me, check my bank account [...] that they would put me under surveillance to check I am not working [...] I cannot eat or sleep with worry. Is there someone I can speak to at the DWP? What should I do? What is likely to happen next?*



STRUGGLING WITH THE COSTS OF RAISING A FAMILY

We found many parents sharing heartbreaking experiences of how financial precarity was impacting their family life.

This ranged from not being able to afford gifts and holidays for their children, to having to sacrifice their own health to support the family.

*Hello, I wondered if anyone has any good advice for doing Christmas on a budget? **I am really struggling this year as my financial situation has changed alot.***

I worry that my kids will be disapointed when they realise how different it'll be this year. So I thought maybe I can find cheaper things to do that are just as fun and magical and hopefully that will distract them from thinking about what they are missing now

I misread my maternity pay policy at my work and this month got paid only half my wages. I can't afford to live on that for the next few months until I go back to work. I'm blessed to work in a job that offers occupational maternity pay on top of statutory maternity pay, but this month that stopped and I only got statutory that is half of my monthly wage. I do not know what I am going to do! I cannot afford to cover the bills and I am scared it will plunge us into debt bc I cannot go back to work straight away.

STRUGGLING WITH THE COSTS OF RAISING A FAMILY

Some posts discussed the specific challenges of both societal stigma and financial difficulty faced by many single parents.

*Really sorry people have been so vile. No one should be made to feel they have to be 'well off' before having children. No one knows your situation - people shouldn't judge! Women who get pregnant naturally would not face this kind of question before conception! The fact is that if you're working, then you'll be entitled to whatever the maternity pay is. It's usually not a lot. If you're not working you can apply for UC but after a year or so they will encourage you to go back to work. Child benefit is less than £100 a month. Anyone who thinks people have kids for the benefits has to be crazy as it's honestly a pittance. I have raised my girl on my own since she was not quite a year old when my ex left. **It's expensive and you will be putting yourself last forever. But it is possible.***

3. MANY PEOPLE ARE EXPERIENCING PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

This third theme reflected the third-largest portion of conversations in the forum - 15% of our dataset.

KEY TERMS USED

We found extensive references to **mental and physical health challenges**.

- People's experiences of hardship are affecting their health in a range of ways
- While there were some references to physical health conditions, the vast majority of posts referred to mental health challenges, including *anxiety, adhd, aspergers, cptsd* and *suicidal ideation*

- More general emotional distress was blended with specific mental health challenges, from *panic, worry* and *dread*, to concerns over being perceived as a *scrounger*

KEY INSIGHTS

- Commonalities with more general emotional distress ([P. 28](#))
- Impact of financial hardship on mental health ([P. 29 - 30](#))
- Impact of mental and physical health on financial stability ([P. 31 - 32](#))

COMMONALITIES WITH MORE GENERAL EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

There was a blurring of more general feelings of worry and stress with specific mental health conditions, with financial struggles and material instability exacerbating psychological distress.

Many expressed a sense that they were being disregarded or gaslit - told that their circumstances couldn't really be that bad.

*A lot of non-empathetic people do not tend to grasp that we would like to be able to live a normal life, that we even feel envious of their ability to adapt and manage stress. After all, **why would we put ourselves through all the criticism, manipulation, scrutiny, misunderstanding, judgement that the benefits systems casts on us,** particularly when [...] it worsens our mental health?*

This system is rigged against all of us who are neurodivergent

[...] and there is a negative stigma in society around people who claim benefits that is being perpetuated. Despite not all of us deserving the judgment and shame because of the challenges we face physically or mentally. [...] They designed the process to be over-whelming and dis-heartening.

IMPACT OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP ON MENTAL HEALTH

The impact of the benefits system on people's mental health was a very common theme.

For example, people cited how long waiting times to receive a decision on a claim or an appeals process was causing or worsening symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.

*I had my tribunal today and won after two years of waiting from my initial application. **It's been a massive ordeal for me, dragging up things I really did not want to talk about** [...] I was in kind of a state when I left & not sure what will happen next*

*I know exactly what you mean. At my lowest point of mental health about twelve or fifteen years ago they had this awful system in place where you had to attend an assessment & if you knew what day it was and could [...] raise your arms you were deemed 'fit for work'. That is all I had to do for them to decide I was a scrounger & did not deserve any sickness benefits. The fact I wanted to die every day and just being around people was actively traumatising meant nothing to them. I do not know if that system is still in place today, or maybe it has improved, but for all their talk about mental health, that experience showed me that the government hates people like me. **They could not care less about mental health. Not even whether I lived or died.***

IMPACT OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIP ON MENTAL HEALTH

Additionally, the impact of low income and financial difficulties, such as debt, on mental health was mentioned across the majority of forums.

*I know a lot of people are going through the same thing with cost of living but I am not sure how much more I can take. I've been up since 2 am crying & feeling like a failure. **We've hit a financial situation with low wages [...] I'm not able to sleep and constantly worried about how to pay for Christmas.** [...] I've been with my partner for six years. He knows about my mental health but does not deal with it very well sometimes. We had a massive row about money and Christmas and the kids heard and they're worried we cannot afford christmas [...] I don't know what I am expecting writing this, some support, advice I do not know. I am just so lost and upset right now and reaching out for help is the only positive thing I can do x*



IMPACT OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH ON FINANCIAL STABILITY

Many people talked about how their (or their loved ones) health problems had negatively impacted their careers and income.

This included examples of mental health challenges limiting the numbers of hours an individual was able to work, having a significant knock-on impact on their take-home pay.

*Hi, My ex is currently struggling to pay his rent for this month. **His wages have been significantly reduced as he's not doing as many hours due to his mental health.** I have been financially helping him because I'm deeply worried & I know he's trying hard to get back into a good place. [...] I cannot give any more than I'm already & that alone is making me poorly. [...] If anyone here [...] has been in a similar situation, could you please reply?*

IMPACT OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH ON FINANCIAL STABILITY

A small number of posts referenced how specific mental health problems made it difficult to understand complex information, including navigating paperwork.

This made accessing appropriate support such as managing debt, more challenging.

We spent hours arguing this morning [...] he's called my mental health a performance [...] I do not feel supported by him [...] So much has happened these last few months [...] I've had so much information passed to me and so many services being involved now. It is overwhelming having to apply for extra help for my son, filling in a load of paperwork and I do not know what to do [...] I am drowning in it all.



4. UNSTABLE LIVING CONDITIONS

This fourth theme reflected the fourth-largest portion of conversations in the forum - 7% of our dataset.

KEY TERMS USED

In addition to the themes discussed in the previous pilot project, we identified housing challenges as an additional area which came through strongly in our data compared to the pilot project.

Keywords relating to housing included: *Rent, remortgage, homeless, renting, landlord, tenancy, accomodation, repossessed*

The topic of housing intersected heavily with our other thematic areas, often resulting from or exacerbating challenges relating to mental health, family and gaps in service provision.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Substandard accommodation ([P. 34](#))
- Rising mortgage payments, rent and energy bills ([P. 35](#))
- Risk of homelessness ([P. 36](#))
- Intersection of housing and other barriers ([P. 37](#))

SUBSTANDARD ACCOMMODATION

Many renters and tenants of social housing discussed how due to limited supply of housing and extortionate rents, they were trapped in substandard and even dangerous housing conditions.

Some felt they had no ability to challenge their landlords or ask for external support, for fear of eviction.

[Original post]

*We have not had hot running water in the kitchen for over 1.5 years. The guy in charge came to see and talk to me in November, promised to get things sorted but not heard or seen him since [...] To top it all off I do not think anyone in the building has a legal contract to rent. The ones we signed were complete b*llshit and illegal. Contacting the Council for help is pointless, they just tell you to go to Citizens Advice.*

[Reply]

Call Shelter for advice. Your council may be able to tell you who the landlord is through the registry scheme. Send an email to your local MP with a dramatic title like "YOUR CONSTITUENTS HAVE NO HEATING". Call environmental health in your area as well. Report it as a health hazard, tell them you have vulnerable young children. Call your Social Worker and tell them you are going to put it on social media and report to the local news that they have done nothing while your kids are freezing. [...] You can't live like that.

RISING MORTGAGE PAYMENTS, RENT AND ENERGY BILLS

Multiple people discussed facing serious challenges with affording energy bills, with some forgoing heating entirely throughout the winter, and others ending up in debt to keep the heating on.

Some felt shut out of the rental market entirely, depending on friends and family, leading to strained relationships.

*I have got smart meters now, I hope they work properly. **The bill will depend on usage and being cold is not helping my mental health.** I might get the cost of living payment and I recently had ESA and PIP payments. [...] Complaining to the housing association didn't go well...*

*Hello. I'm 36 years old and still living with my parents. **I can't afford to rent a house alone with a basic salary.** My parents are very critical and there are often conflicts. I am scared I will live with them until I'm over 40...*

I have not been able to pay my gas bill or water rates for 6 months now

RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

Many discussed their fears that they or their family members would be evicted from their homes.

There were a diverse range of reasons individuals faced homelessness - for some, it was due to retaliation by landlords for raising concerns about the quality of the accommodation, for others it was due to rising rents.

*The DWP will not lift a finger to help . The only ones who will help if you are struggling with keeping a roof over your head is your local council, but in reality they'll only help when the bailiffs are at your door to evict. **My advice is don't leave your current property voluntarily, otherwise the council will claim you have made yourself intentionally homeless** and will not help at all. In the meantime contact Shelter*

*For the past 25 years, my Dad has lived in a flat paying rent with support from housing benefits. [...] Recently the estate agent told him they are planning to sell the flat and he needs to move out in 6 months. **With his income, it would be basically impossible to have a deposit for a flat, let alone long pass checks to be allowed to rent,** as the rate for a 1 bedroom flat in London is well over his income.*

INTERSECTION OF HOUSING AND OTHER BARRIERS

Housing challenges often reflected the intersection of multiple other forms of hardship and barriers.

Some cited how relationship breakdown had left both parties with unstable housing situations, others discussed how benefits were barely able to cover the cost of rent, or how they wished they could do more to support family members with their housing struggles.

*The council rarely rehome single people, there just is not the supply any more. **You'll be at the bottom of a very long list.** [...] If you don't already claim UC then either start or update your claim as newly single.*

I am receiving government support now. Similar - the majority is going to pay rent. I'm trying to find a job but it's so difficult. I've applied to sixty places in the past few weeks but only had one (unsuccessful) interview so far.

*[My mum] has been in the same public housing house for 30 years. She has trouble with the stairs and the house is falling apart in some places. She needs to move eventually. It is a big reason I play the lottery, **I would love to be able to buy her first home for her.***

5. DISTRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICIANS REMAINS WIDESPREAD

This final theme reflected the smallest portion of conversations in the forum - 4% of our dataset.

KEY TERMS USED

- Though less prevalent than other themes examined in this report, there were notable examples of discussions relating to political events, issues and actors.
- This topic of discussion included conversations specifically about elections, though people remained split on whether they believed a change in government would help.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Existing distrust has been inflamed by high-profile scandals ([P. 39](#))
- The DPID bill is sparking fears that additional powers will be used against claimants ([P. 40](#))
- Local councillors and MPs as sources of support ([P. 41](#))
- National politics seen as failing the disabled and those in poverty ([P. 42 - 43](#))
- Stigma from media and politicians entrenches distrust ([P. 44](#))

EXISTING DISTRUST HAS BEEN INFLAMED BY HIGH-PROFILE SCANDALS

There was a strong sense of distrust in politicians and government services such as Jobcentres, backed up by long standing patterns of negative interaction.

This has been inflamed by errors and abuses such as the Post Office and contaminated blood scandals.

*Looks like a typically ill thought-out mistake by politicians to add to the catalogue of reasons we need to review our whole system. Politicians shouldn't be allowed to stand when they're as thick as this batch. [...] **look at the 20 years Post Office Inquiry, the 50 years AIDS Blood Inquiry, the NHS fiasco** caused by the Chancellor cutting staff pre-covid...
250K deaths from Government idiocy*

As others have said this feels like North Korea.

It's like I'm already living in a dystopian society and, yes, the vulnerable are the perfect group to experiment on.

No, I do not doubt that they can be such monsters. It's all about money and obedience.

THE DPID BILL IS SPARKING FEARS THAT ADDITIONAL POWERS WILL BE USED AGAINST CLAIMANTS

The [text of the DPID bill](#) and [explanatory notes](#) appeared multiple times among the links shared within the forums.

Some individuals were paying close attention to the proposed legislation and expressed concern about what it might mean for their lives or others experiencing financial hardship.

*Why am I not surprised? I'm equally not shocked it is being passed through the 'Data Protection and Digital Information Bill' which claims to be based on safety and security. [...] I understand they have a responsibility to tackle crime, ensure taxes are paid and update the financial system to meet the demands of the future. What I'm not comfortable with however is the **power that this will give government into peoples everyday lives by governing our behaviour and deciding for us what they believe is fit***

*Learned that the Government is tabling a motion that will allow anyone on benefits including pensions to have their bank accounts available to the Government to look at any time. Even when you have done nothing wrong. **Is this a violation of privacy and is the UK Government becoming too overpowering?***

LOCAL COUNCILLORS AND MPS AS SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Some people had discussions about the practical role their MP could or could not play in dispute resolution, primarily in the context of benefits claims.

In general, individuals saw local politicians as being a potential source of support and access to justice when services failed.

I am glad that your MP is helping because you have had a horrendous time

People really need to start going to their MPs about this! *The stories we keep hearing about Restart are awful. No-one should have to put up with calls from those people all day long with threats of sanctions*

I got in touch with my local MP and within 24 hours I had my back-pay and backdated rent paid, then was paid as normal the following pay-day.

I cannot stress enough how good my MP was in getting this sorted. I'd recommend anyone having similar problems to contact their own local MP.

NATIONAL POLITICS SEEN AS FAILING THE DISABLED AND THOSE IN POVERTY

Despite acknowledging the potential for local politicians to play a positive role, the majority of the conversation on political topics was extremely negative about the likelihood of those in national politics taking steps which would improve their lives.

*God, I would give anything to have my life back working. I loved my job and yet **government loves to make people like us feel guilty** and the right wingers judge us all for a very small minority who do abuse the system.*

I'm under the impression that the prime minister wants to kill off poor people. [...] By their own hand or starvation, he doesn't care cos that's less money they have to payout on the disgusting poor people who are too lazy to contribute to society.

*The more disabled people who are vocal about the need to vote the more likely this is to be noticed by the political parties and **they may have to start catering for us [...]** **The disabled are heavily disfranchised [...]** I really wish that disability charities would run a highly visible campaign to encourage the disabled community that their vote matters.*

NATIONAL POLITICS SEEN AS FAILING THE DISABLED AND THOSE IN POVERTY

Many were pessimistic about the upcoming elections, and were not convinced that the Labour party's policies would be significantly better than the Conservative party's current approach to people in poverty.

*I cannot wait for the Far Right Tories to be replaced by the Authoritarian Labour party to continue the same agenda. It is going to be a glorious General Election that will spell **the end of the people's trust in Westminster forever.***

*I watched the Chancellor on Laura Kuenssberg's show this morning. [...] **He has no idea how much his nefarious policies will hurt the unemployed, the poor or disabled.** [...] The Shadow Chancellor wasn't that much better with her answers.*

*The Tories will get voted out no doubt but I have no idea how you can even begin to fix something so broken. I hope it improves, but sadly **I do not have any faith in any politicians or parties anyway.** [...] I do not know when Labour is in power how they'll even begin to repair and reform?*

STIGMA FROM MEDIA AND POLITICIANS ENTRENCHES DISTRUST

Many referenced the impact of how MP's and figures in the media view and talk about vulnerable people or those on benefits.

When done in a stigmatising way, many felt that this had a broader negative effect on broader societal discourse, and the treatment of vulnerable people.

Feel like a criminal but I am just trying to survive. [...] Why isn't there blame directed to the Government? Why are shows like Benefit Street being green lit?

Why do people hate us poor and disabled so much?

*I feel immense guilt like I do not deserve my Limited Capability for Work-Related Activity, or that the DWP will see that I am buying something 'inessential' and remove my benefits. **I live in constant fear of my benefits being taken away** [...] it makes me feel like such scum. I am totally at the mercy of a government that would rather see me suffer.*

*Thanks for all your responses, it really helps to know I'm not alone in feeling this way. Things are a struggle right now, **especially with the way government and the media are treating the longterm sick and disabled,** but places like this forum give me a little bit of relief knowing I am actually being listened to ❤️*

POLITICAL FIGURES WERE OVERWHELMINGLY THE MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED INDIVIDUALS



HOW DIFFERENT INDIVIDUALS WERE TALKED ABOUT

While some users discussed political figures in a neutral way, in the context of sharing information about current affairs, many discussions were extremely negative.

***Jeremy Hunt** would last 2 hours on Universal Credit - that would wipe that smile off his face.*

*Thank you, I was watching **Jeremy Hunt** talking about it on the TV. Government hasn't got a clue. I have lost count of the amount of times I've had doctors appts to prove I am disabled - they are very degrading. The last one I had they took my mobility devices off me - I appealed and got it reinstated*

***Sunak** in particular talked about his desire to have less people claiming benefits because of being unable to work, such as long term sickness and disability. [...] This prompted accusations from disabled charities that the government was punishing the disabled & raising anxiety for households that were already struggling.*

Many users shared financial advice from public figures such as Martin Lewis, who was generally discussed in a positive light.

*It's hard cutting back at Christmas, but if there's no alternative, as **Martin Lewis** says it isn't worth getting into debt for!*

*Does anyone know what's the latest on back dating national insurance credits for stay-at-home parents? [...] **Martin Lewis** and **Claer Barrett** have each made reference to it on TV*

*Fight for what you deserve. They want to make it as hard as they can. It is all about saving money for the "public finances" a.k.a **Boris Johnson** and his parties.*

CONCLUSIONS

Wave One of our extended Social Media Listening partnership between Demos and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has yielded vital and deeply concerning insights.

The specific issues we have identified facing people experiencing **financial hardship**, from **unstable living conditions** to barriers to **accessing government services**, resonate with a large body of evidence, including the previous pilot project and the guidance the Grassroots Poverty Action Group have generously shared with us.

Where we see the value of Social Media Listening, as part of a broader Insight Infrastructure, is in the specific stories and voices of people which shine throughout this report. We see the **dynamics of these online communities of support, aiding each other both emotionally and**

practically through extremely challenging personal circumstances. We have done our best to present these stories with care and respect for privacy.

Some of the findings surprised us. Discussions of the Data Protection and Digital Identity bill, for example, demonstrated **extremely in depth political engagement from people who are often portrayed using stereotypes of being politically inactive or apathetic.** We will discuss in follow-up blogs how this is evidence that scepticism towards traditional forms of political participation is not coming from a lack of knowledge, but rather from a **deep awareness of the limitations and failures of the political system.**

We look forward to sharing further insights with you over the course of 2024.



APPENDIX 1

METHODOLOGY

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

Drawing on our [previous pilot project](#), as well as expert input from JRF and the GPAG, we collected data from 5 relevant forums. Our analysis was performed using the Method 52 platform, developed by CASM Technology. Our methodology consisted of two broad phases.

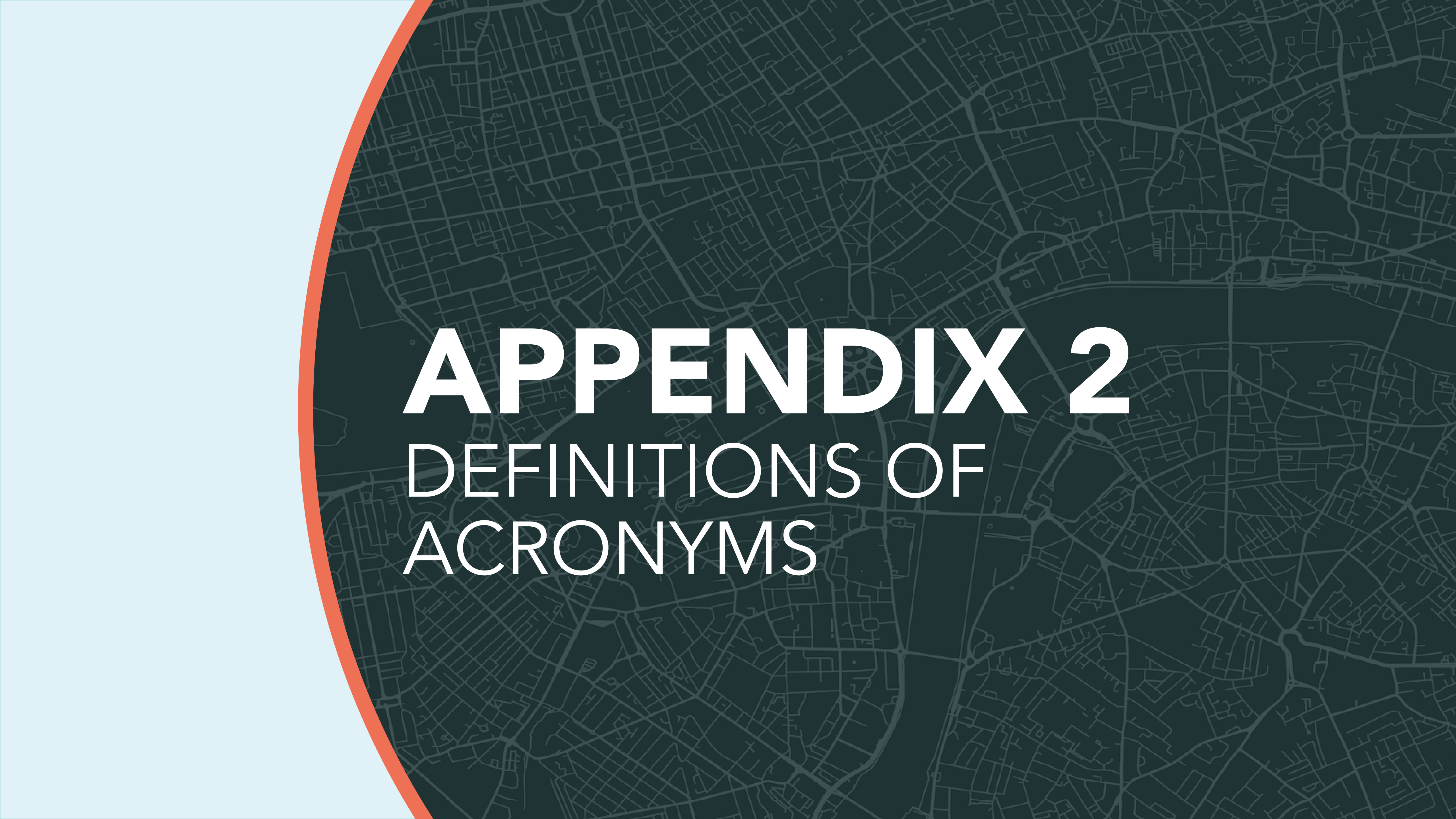
Computational Text Analysis

First, a combination of inductive computational techniques, 'Surprising Phrase Detection' and 'Named Entity Recognition', which allowed us to surface characteristic terms, phrases and discussions occurring across the dataset. In addition, we added a new type of analysis, Link Extraction, which allows us to identify which links and resources individuals are sharing most often. The data tables can be found in Appendix 2.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Our second phase consisted of building up keyword lists of related terms from the first step into broad thematic areas. We honed in on the four key themes from the pilot project (Family, Politics, Services and Health), plus an additional examination of housing as a particularly prominent area. We used these keyword lists to filter our dataset into smaller samples, which we could analyse qualitatively through in-depth close-reading by analysts. This allowed us to build up a detailed picture of how individuals were responding to particular challenges and circumstances.





APPENDIX 2

DEFINITIONS OF ACRONYMS

DEFINITIONS

DWP	The Department of Work and Pensions
MSE	Money Saving Expert - a free advice site owned by Martin Lewis
AP	The Associated Press
OPG	Office of the Public Guardian
HMRC	HM Revenue & Customs
UN	United Nations
LCWRA group	Limited Capability for Work-Related Activity (LCWRA) group
RBS	Royal Bank of Scotland





APPENDIX 3

UNDERLYING DATA

ABOUT OUR UNDERLYING DATA

The following tables show a section of the outputs of our main computational methods of analysis - Named Entity Recognition (NER) and Surprising Phrase Extraction (SPD) - which we used to produce our wordclouds.

NER is a process by which we train an algorithm to identify particular phrases within our dataset which are likely to be the names of individuals, places or organisations. This method struggled to distinguish between the acronyms commonly used to discuss types of benefits, such as UC for Universal Credit, and the acronyms used to refer to organisations, such as the DWP for the Department of Work and Pensions. As a result, our analysts manually sorted the dataset into these two categories.

SPD process which compares the entire text of our dataset with an 'average' selection of text (in this case, a large collection of Wikipedia articles), in order to identify which words and phrases are much more likely to occur in our dataset than the 'average' dataset. This allows us to draw out the topics which are distinctive, enabling us to understand the overall contents of our dataset.

In subsequent waves of this project, the following datasets will be used as a benchmark for comparison, allowing us to understand how the topics of discussion vary over time.

TABLE OF EXTRACTED ENTITIES - PEOPLE

PEOPLE	COUNT
Jeremy Hunt	10
Mims Davies	6
Martin Lewis	5
Boris Johnson	5
Gordon Brown	5
Stephen Timms	5
Tom Pursglove	5
Peter Schofield	5
Biden	4
Mel Stride	4
Alison McGovern	3
Rishi Sunak	3
Olivier De Schutter	3
Jo Churchill	3
Viscount Younger	3

TABLE OF EXTRACTED ENTITIES - ORGANISATIONS

ORGANISATIONS	COUNT
DWP	827
NHS	130
MSE	11
AP	9
OPG	8
Sainsbury	8
PayPal	8
HMRC	7
Tesco	7
Social Security Scotland	7
UN	7
eBay	6
LCWRA group	5
McDonald	4
Barclays	4

ORGANISATIONS	COUNT
NatWest	4
RBS	4
House of Lords	4
House of Commons	4

Note: The entity extraction has picked up many acronyms which are types of benefits, which we manually separated

TABLE OF EXTRACTED ENTITIES - BENEFITS

BENEFITS	COUNT
LCWRA	228
WCA	179
DLA	106
UC	72
SDP	68
ESA	62
ADP	57
LPA	40
JSA	39
ESA	33
IHT	23
JCP	23
RTI	17
CMS	15
SSP	11

ORGANISATIONS	COUNT
CHC	10
EDP	9
CB ESA	8

TABLES OF SURPRISING PHRASES (BY FORUM)

Disability Help		
PHRASES	SPD SCORE	COUNT
lcwra	6.093197634	1025
the dwp	5.405013243	274
carers allowance	5.296433504	245
the wca	4.285211227	54
lcw	4.138075346	145
as a carer	3.806004162	12
backdated	3.786604912	102
dla	3.776762312	101
doesn	3.62770907	1
understanding of the descriptors	3.438706231	7

Financial Help		
PHRASES	SPD SCORE	COUNT
doesn	3.909537101	0
the lpa	3.791892791	28
railcard	3.584541486	65
carers	3.470782601	58
a carer	3.342401434	17
hes	3.099993271	40
mse	2.994909802	36
wouldn	2.994909802	0
hubby has no	2.966818067	10
the covid	2.845824756	10

Mental Health Help		
PHRASES	SPD SCORE	COUNT
yrs	4.608418272	10
rgi	3.925123387	5
groceries	3.925123387	5
lcwra	3.706869821	4
hugs	3.706869821	4
afford to	2.011449306	9
biden	1.864731065	5
disability	1.807078899	40
pasta	1.646477499	4
pip	1.462628515	8

TABLES OF SURPRISING PHRASES (BY FORUM)

Family Help		
PHRASES	SPD SCORE	COUNT
babysitting	5.552550087	10
a childminder	5.048303434	5
stepchange	4.651001637	4
centre parcs	4.651001637	4
skint	4.651001637	4
ivf	3.790690695	16
xmas	3.382164442	16
childcare	3.180435453	11
maternity	3.1759574	13
didn	2.987911112	0

Government Help		
PHRASES	SPD SCORE	COUNT
the dwp	5.710637786	701
lcwra	4.623167674	397
the wca	3.708512471	51
a mandatory reconsideration	3.650281274	66
adhd	3.623270854	146
the jobcentre	3.552369445	72
lcw	3.530080261	133
doesn	3.255089662	0
have a carer	3.204368852	9
dla	3.193908505	95

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At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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DEMOS

PUBLISHED BY DEMOS MAY 2024
© DEMOS. SOME RIGHTS RESERVED.
15 WHITEHALL, LONDON, SW1A 2DD
T: 020 3878 3955
HELLO@DEMOS.CO.UK
WWW.DEMOS.CO.UK