

I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user.
I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief.
I'm not a National Insurance Number or blip on a screen.
My name is Daniel Blake.



“Computer Says No”

Disabled Welfare Experiences under AI Governance

Humphrey Curtis, Adam Jenkins, Alistair Gentry, Sioban Zacharek, Sally McVicker, Tim Neate & Filip Bircanin

King’s College London · Aphasia Re-Connect

CHI 2026 · Barcelona, Spain · April 13–17



The Problem Domain

7 million disabled people in the UK depend on welfare benefits

£5 billion in cuts to welfare and disability benefits in the 2024 Budget sparking protests

69% of UK foodbank users identify as disabled

£573m in UK government AI contracts for 2025 including a landmark OpenAI deal



The Research Gap

Welfare digitisation risks **deepening exclusion** for disabled people

Yet little HCI research centres disabled communities' **lived experiences** — or their critical **guidance** on AI-automated futures

Our focus is on **communities with aphasia** (~0.5M people in the UK)

Welcome to
Caxton House



Department
for Work &
Pensions

visitors Entrance

Research Questions

RQ1: How do people with aphasia experience accessing **digital welfare services**, including the **facilitators, barriers, emotions** and **harms** they encounter?

RQ2: What lessons can be drawn to inform the **inclusive design** of **AI-automated welfare** service infrastructures?



Method: Four-Stage Co-Design Study

42 co-designers · 8 workshops · 6 weeks · 29 people with aphasia

1 · Late May · Board Formation

Advisory board, unstructured interviews, UC migration call

3 · Mid July · Journey Mapping

Mapping barriers & facilitators across 5 welfare service journeys

2 · Early July · Ranking Access

Help & Feelings card decks, ranking services by difficulty & value

4 · Late July · Design Fiction

5 speculative video prompts depicting AI-automated welfare futures

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) HELP

For long-term physical or mental health conditions or disabilities that make it difficult to carry out daily living activities or get around. Stroke is a common condition for PIP claims.

It's not means-tested (your savings or earnings don't matter). It's assessed by private contractors on a points-based system.

It has two components: DAILY LIVING (everyday tasks like washing and dressing, but also includes communication) and MOBILITY (getting around). Getting the enhanced mobility component grants access to the Motability scheme.

PIP may also lead to an increase in other benefits or automatic entitlement to additional benefits.

PIP CARD REVERSE SIDE

--- (very ne)

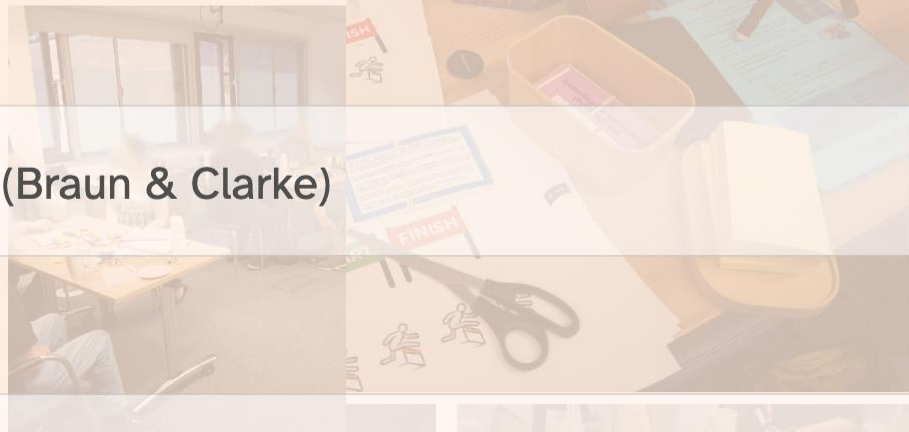
FEELINGS

START FINISH

Laptop computer

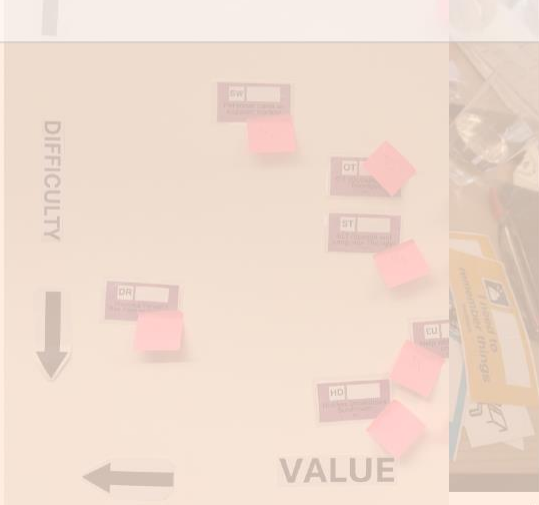
WHERE

C



Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)

2,141 coded discussion instances → **6** themes



Results: Six Themes

The Cost of Performing Disability

Eligibility theatre, emotional toll

Navigating Digital Bureaucracy

Literacy barriers, system veterans

Hostile Design

Denial & deterrence as systemic objective

Geographies of Inequity

Class, region & digital divides

The Accessibility Paradox

Designed for access, trapped in limbo

Envisioned Automated Futures

Patient, multimodal, democratic AI

The Cost of Performing Disability

Eligibility Theatre

Forced to “prove” disability in narrow, visible terms

Aphasia often unrecognised or dismissed

Emotional Toll

Confusing, humiliating, exhausting processes

Repeated denials compound trauma

"Every time I applied... they said No! No! No! It makes you feel you don't have a disability." -

P4

"You've got to have a physical disability... they don't recognise aphasia as a disability." - P3

Geographies of Inequity

Mobilising Support Networks

Access is collective, not individual
Family, friends & advocates bridge system
gaps

Uneven Landscapes

Regional variation shapes access
Some areas adaptive; others phone-only and
exclusionary

"Not everyone can afford a family member to support their applications. People want to be empowered!" – P2

"My doctor is terrible... you can't get an in-person appointment... they've changed it to a phone call – I said I can't do it, what's the point!" – P26

Navigating Digital Bureaucracy

Digital Barriers

Logins, passwords, 2FA exclusionary

Smartphone-only access — forms

“impossible” on small screens

System Veterans

Applicants develop “hacks”

Timing phone queues

Using alternative addresses

Applying for gateway benefits

"Voice recognition doesn't work with people with aphasia!" — P4

"The trick is, all the lines open at exactly 8 o'clock... I timed it — dialled at 7.59.02, and I'm first or second in the queue." — CG1

Accessibility Paradox & Hostile Design

Outourcing & Trapped in Limbo

Endless cycles of paperwork, appeals, and reassessments

PIP applications took up to 9 years — most ending in appeal

Dehumanising Assessments

Adversarial assessors

Reports contained fabrications

Surveillance embedded in the process

Obfuscation by Design

Systems built for deterrence, not access
Forms “lost” and rules arbitrary

"They are not doctors. They are basic office clerks briefed to cut benefits." - SLT1

"The assessor is looking to deny you... the DWP don't attend the hearing!" - P4

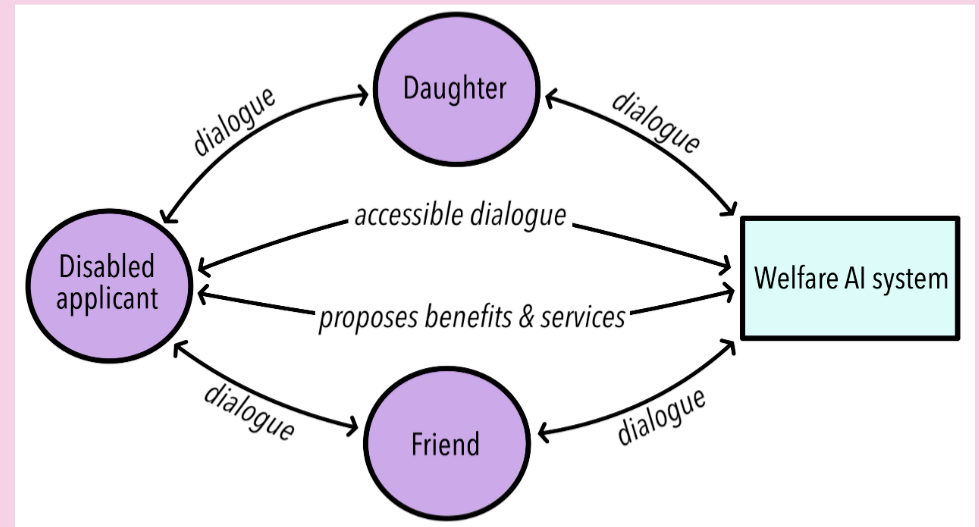
Aphasia- Accessible AI Dialogues

Patient (wait a full minute)

Multimodal (text + visuals + speech)

Interdependent (involve trusted allies)

Proactive (suggest benefits & services)



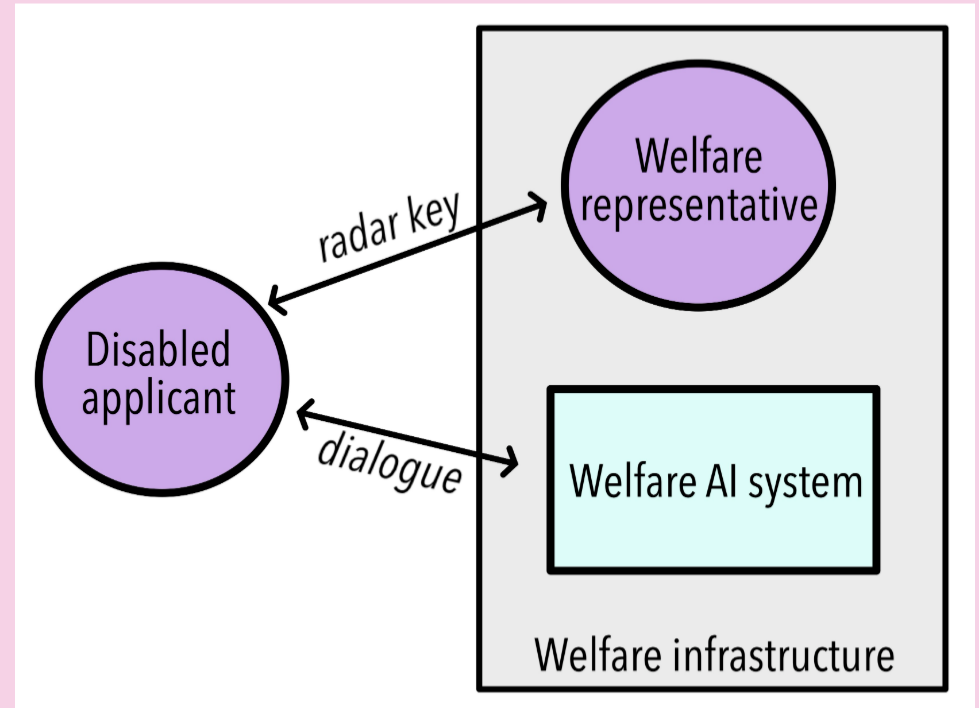
Empathetic AI in Welfare

Compassionate & grounded in lived reality

Human-in-the-loop (“radar key”)

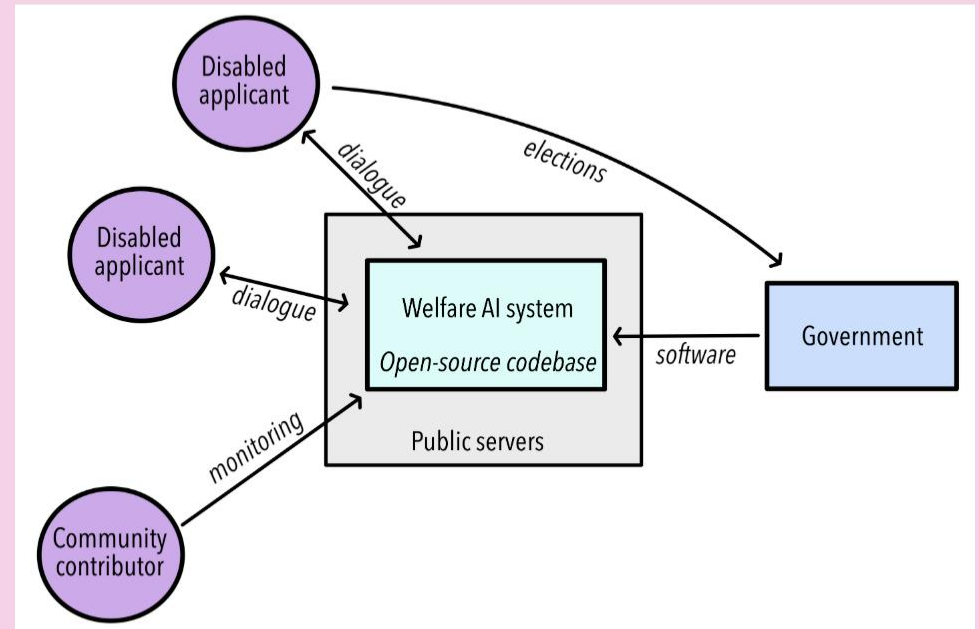
Transparent decision summaries

Reduce workload, not add to it



Open, Democratic & Truthful AI

Open-source, public servers
Free from governmental manipulation
Truthful about entitlements & timelines
Accountable — not outsourced to black boxes



Implications for HCI

1 • Bottom-Up Digital Governance

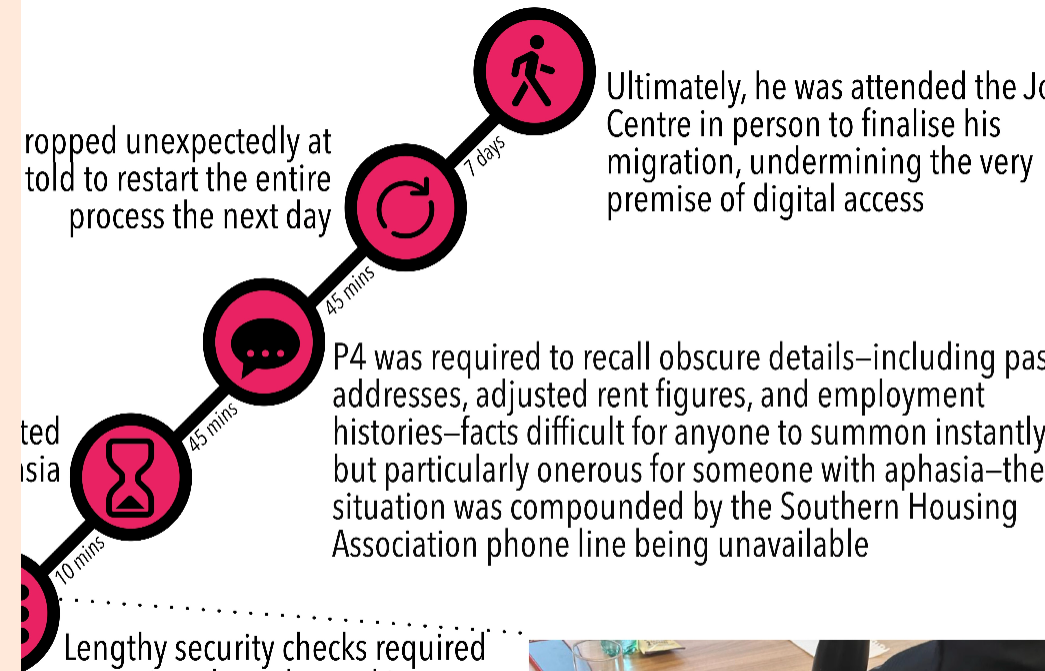
Smartphone-first • Interdependent access •
Prioritise disabled users • Resist techno-
solutionism

2 • Compassionate AI Systems

Pre-populated data • Self-attestation • Plain-
language decisions • Reduce workload

3 • Accountability & AI as Scapegoat

Deterrence risk • Blame-shifting • Demand
transparency & oversight



Lengthy security checks required
extensive phone keypad input

reatening terms and
ad aloud in legalistic
ning stress



P4 performing keypad entry

Thank You



"It's up to us individuals to try and make it better. But we don't have the power." — P2

Supplementary Materials

- Accessible card-decks & toolkit co-design materials
- Near-future design fiction videos

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doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791025



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