

**From Crisis to Compassion? A case study exploring the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes  
towards the welfare state in the UK**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Covid-19 demanded a worldwide and comprehensive "whole-of-government and whole-of-society response" (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020). The UK government announced the first national lockdown on 23 March 2020, mandating citizens to 'stay at home' (Johnson, 2020), which had a seismic impact on society and the economy (Person, 2022). The UK welfare state was presented with the enormity of the challenge to keep the nation 'afloat' throughout the crisis (Crace, 2020, p.95). The Conservative government responded with unprecedented public spending on welfare provisions and employment schemes; the creation of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), commonly known as the 'furlough scheme,' and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) (Mackley, 2021. p.3). The furlough scheme was used by 1.3 million businesses, and one in four employees had been furloughed by June 2021 (Mackley, 2021. p.3). Despite the creation of these schemes, the number of individuals relying on Universal Credit increased from 3 million in March 2020 to 5.8 million by November 2020 (Mackley, 2021. p.3).

Research has shown that a positive impact on attitudes towards welfare can be found when welfare spending increases, and when it includes larger parts of the population (Mau, 2004, Esping-Anderson, 2004). Given the surge in direct experience of the benefits system, plus the high levels of engagement with schemes such as the furlough scheme, there were reasons to believe Covid-19 could lead to an increase in positive attitudes towards the welfare state. Beyond the increased direct experience of social security, there was also a sense of solidarity across society, and wide support for public services. For example, the first national lockdown was accompanied by the public health message 'Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives' (Addley,

2020), and for nine weeks the public spent evenings collectively clapping for the NHS in a very ‘un-British ritual’ (Addley, 2020). Furthermore, there was a notable change in public discourse about the welfare state (De Vries et al., 2021, Orton and Sarkar 2022). Negative portrayals of benefits claimants and the welfare state are common in the media (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). In contrast, during the pandemic, the media reported more positively, for example the need for a ‘safety net’ and for boosting payments under the system (Knapman and Evans, 2020). The government's decision to provide a temporary uplift of £20 to Universal Credit in March 2020 was widely reported as positive and necessary, whereas the decision to reverse it, in July 2021, received widespread backlash amongst both broadsheets and tabloids (Feehan, 2021, Butler, 2021). The increased sense of solidarity through a shared crisis across society led to further questions of whether the experience of the pandemic could precipitate more favorable public attitudes to the welfare state (de Vries et al., 2021), and therefore the perceived deservingness of benefit claimants.

There is an ever-growing body of research supporting the theory that public support for the welfare state is largely based on the perceived deservingness of the person or group in receipt of the benefit (van Oorschot 2006, van Oorschot et al., 2017, Laenen, 2020). Research has also found a link between public deservingness opinions and welfare regime types, which were first defined by Esping-Anderson (Lasen, 2008, Laenen, 2018). The UK is characterised as a liberal regime type (Esping-Anderson, 2004), and research supports the theory the British public favour reliance on the market and individual responsibility, seemingly matching the Conservative government’s neo-liberal discourse and framing of the welfare state (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2019, Wiggan 2012). Covid-19 provided the opportunity to explore the attitude towards the deservingness of people made unemployed due to Covid-19, and the welfare state more widely,

but also the opportunity to explore whether there was an impact to the commonly found attitudes about the ‘responsible’ individual, towards unemployed people and welfare recipients (Wiggan 2012, p.400).

Existing research exploring the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes towards the welfare state in the UK has not found significant changes, or any changes that were felt to be long-lasting (de Vries et al., 2021, Curtice et al., 2022). However, all the research was quantitative and relied on survey data. Given Covid-19's unique nature, pre-existing survey questions may not be an appropriate method to capture changes in attitudes, so the existing research may not be adequate. There is a need to explore the impact of Covid-19 on public attitudes towards the welfare state through qualitative methods to understand what, if any, impact there has been.

### ***Research aims***

This inductive research will seek to bridge an existing gap in academic knowledge, by using qualitative methods to explore whether Covid-19 impacted public attitudes towards the welfare state. Through an exploratory case study design, conducting focus groups, this dissertation will address the following research questions:

- Did Covid-19 impact public attitudes towards the welfare state in the UK?
- Did Covid-19 impact perceptions of the deservingness of welfare recipients, and in turn support for the welfare state in the UK?

Taylor-Gooby has argued that the UK government has sought to ‘change the direction of the welfare state in the UK from an engine of social cohesion to one of social division’ (2016,

p.729). The research that will be carried out for this dissertation is important as it aims to shed light on whether the impact of Covid-19 means future spending on the welfare state will be in line with public opinion, or against it, and whether there is scope for a welfare state that can be described as ‘an engine of social cohesion’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2016, p.729).

### ***Definitions***

The welfare state can be seen as having two roles firstly, that of social security and the government activity of the ‘transfer of payments,’ and secondly, public services such as healthcare and education (Curtice, 2020, p.95). For the purpose of this dissertation, reference to the welfare state relates solely to the social security and transfer of payments role. Unless otherwise stated, reference to ‘the welfare state’ refers to the welfare state in the UK.

### ***Overview***

This introduction will be followed by a literature review. The following section will confirm the methodology and research design. The research findings and discussion will follow, and finally, the conclusion.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

As this research intends to explore the impact of Covid-19 on public attitudes towards the deservingness of welfare recipients, the literature review will start by examining the deservingness theory in more detail. It will then consider the empirical finding of public attitudes

towards the UK, prior to Covid-19. Finally, it will look at the existing research into the impact of Covid-19 on public attitudes towards the welfare state in the UK. The literature review will highlight the limitations in these studies and outline the gaps caused by an overreliance on quantitative methods. It will suggest these gaps can be addressed by a qualitative study.

### ***The deservingness theory***

The principal claim of the deservingness theory is that the public support for the welfare state is largely dependent on the perceived deservingness of the target group of the benefit (van Oorschot et al., 2017, p.335). It seeks to identify and explain why some recipients are considered by the public to be more deserving than others (van Oorschot et al., 2000). The deservingness theory does not necessarily exclude all other theories around support for the welfare state, such as self-interest or ideology, for example (Roosma et al., 2015, p.179), but argues that the deservingness theory is ‘crucial’ to understanding the social legitimacy of the welfare state (van Oorschot, 2006, p.26). The theory was first presented and outlined by Van Oorschot (2000), who proposed that there are five criteria applied when someone assesses the level of a claimant’s deservingness, now commonly known as the CARIN criteria:

1. ‘Control,’ the level of control someone has over their situation.
2. ‘Attitude,’ the attitude of a claimant, for example, are they are grateful for help and or do they appear willing to look for work?
3. ‘Reciprocity,’ to what extent someone is seen to have previously contributed, or is seen to be likely to contribute in the future, to society.
4. ‘Identity,’ how the close the target group is deemed to be to ‘you.’

5. 'Need,' the greater level of need or poverty, the more deserving the claimant is deemed to be (van Oorschot, 2006, p.26).

The idea of 'deservingness' can be traced back to laws such as the British Poor Law 1934, which made clear distinctions between those 'deserving of relief' and those that were 'undeserving' (van Oorschot, 2000, p.35). Coughlin concluded from international research that the public still make these distinctions (1980, cited in van Oorschot, 2000, p.35). He argued there was 'a universal dimension of support' (1980, cited in van Oorschot, 2000, p.35), and that in Western society, across time, public support was universally highest for the elderly, then sick and disabled people, followed by families with children and working age, and the able bodied unemployed ranking last (Coughlin, 1980, cited in van Oorschot, 2000, p.35).

Although there is research which suggests the 'universal dimension of support,' may not be as consistent as has been argued (Laenen and Meuleman, 2017, p.37), there is a strong body of work which has found working age unemployed claimants are seen as the least deserving target group by the public (van Oorschot, 2006, de Vries, 2008, Uunk and van Oorschot, 2008).

Research has also shown recipients of unemployment benefits are also negatively associated with traits such as laziness and less self-responsibility (van Oorschot 2006). Given the unique circumstances of Covid-19 and its impact on society and the economy, there is scope to consider what impact Covid-19 had on public opinion on the deservedness of people needing to claim unemployment benefits. It has also been argued that the 'need,' criterion, whether someone can be 'blamed' for their need, may be the most important of the CARIN criteria (van Oorschot, 2000, p.43). Again, given the unique circumstances of Covid-19, this raises the question of

whether an impact will be seen on public attitudes towards the welfare state, and whether any impact was long lasting or restricted to the timeline of the pandemic.

There is also a need for in-depth qualitative research that considers public opinions on deservingness. Existing deservingness research is dominated by quantitative research relying on survey questions and data. The CARIN criteria can be independently defined, but research suggests that they are likely to be linked and involve overlapping (Lanen et al., 2020, p.205). It has therefore been argued there is a need for inductive qualitative research, (Lanen et al., 2020, p.205), where participants have an open-ended structure format that allow for observation of the ways in which deservingness is discussed, as opposed to ‘top-down survey research’ (Lanen et al., 2020, p.193). This dissertation aims to add to the body of knowledge on the deservingness theory by exploring deservingness opinions through an inductive study using qualitative methods.

It is also important to note that research within the deservingness theory has found evidence of an ‘institutional logic’ (Larsen, 2008, p.2), which suggests public opinion on deservingness corresponds with the ‘institutional structures of the welfare state’ (Larsen, 2008, p.3). Therefore, consideration must be given to the ‘normative criteria’ of the relevant welfare regime (Lanen et al., 2020, p.207). The literature review will now consider existing research on UK attitudes towards the welfare state.

### ***Attitudes towards the welfare state in the UK, prior to Covid-19***

The UK welfare state is typically defined as a liberal welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 2004). A liberal welfare regime is characterised as being heavily reliant on the ‘market,’ with limited state



intervention and strict means tested benefits, emphasising ideas of personal responsibility (Esping-Andersen, 2004). Universal Credit, the new form of social assistance for working age claimants, was initially rolled out in 2013 and was intended to heavily reform the benefit system. With an emphasis on the importance of work and personal responsibility, this was viewed by some as an attempt by the current Conservative government to further a neoliberal agenda (Patrick, 2012, Wiggan, 2012). It has been argued that the reforms aimed to make a clear separation between the ‘deserving and undeserving groups’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2016, p.37), by introducing greater conditionality and sanctions, and were intended to make the welfare state divisive, as opposed to fostering ‘social cohesion,’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2016, p.729).

Research has shown that welfare policies can be legitimated through corresponding public opinion (Richards-Gray, 2022, Larsen, 2008), and recent empirical work has also demonstrated that attitudes in the UK can be understood and framed within the context of its liberal welfare regime (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2019, Laenen et al., 2019). For example, in a comparative qualitative study across the UK, Germany and Norway, Taylor-Gooby et al. used democratic forums to explore attitudes towards the welfare states (2019). They found that participants from UK had a clear emphasis on themes related to neoliberal ideals, such as personal and individual responsibility as opposed to relying on help from the government, with only the ‘harshest need recognised for state assistance’ (p.130). In contrast, participants from Germany focused on the ‘value and dignity of work’ (p.125), and participants from Norway tended to discuss ‘inclusion and equality’ (p.119). All three countries recognised growing inequality, but whereas Germany and Norway thought about ways this could be addressed, for the UK participants, there was an acceptance of inevitability of inequality in a capitalist society. Instead, they placed greater focus and emphasis on the idea of ‘moral divisions between responsible workers and work-shy benefit

claimers' (p.129), and advocated placing stricter conditions on benefits to address this. Similarly, a case study published in 2022, which examined the disproportionate impact of the welfare reforms on women in the UK (Richards-Gray), found that although participants felt the welfare state could have a positive role, they felt the system needed to prevent 'an unfair advantage' (p.544) for benefit claimants over people who were working. These findings are in line with the Taylor-Gooby et al. study (2019).

Despite the strong body of work that supports the idea that the British public prioritise neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility and minimal welfare intervention in line with the UK's liberal welfare regime type, the schemes created by the government during Covid-19 were popular. There was also wide support in the media for measures such as the temporary uplift to Universal credit (Butler, 2021), and attention drawn to the low level of benefits such as statutory sick pay (O'Connor, 2020). Whilst the furlough scheme was not necessarily a universal payment, it was a non-means tested payment made to millions and therefore did not distinguish between the 'deserving' and 'non-deserving.' Rothstein has argued that in welfare systems dominated by universal welfare policy:

*"welfare policy does not, therefore, turn into a question of what should be done about "the poor" and "the maladjusted," but rather a question of what constitutes general fairness in respect to the relation between citizens and the state. The question becomes not "how shall we solve their problem?" but rather "how shall we solve our common problem" (cited in Larsen, 2008, p.8).*

This raises legitimate questions about whether Covid-19 could lead to more positive attitudes towards the welfare state and the deservingness of claimants. It has also been suggested that the

doctrine of ‘anti-welfare’ amongst the public may not be as well established as some have assumed (Orton and Sarkar, 2023), and furthermore, the results of The British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) surveys over recent years have shown signs of recent changes in attitudes (Curtice, 2020).

The BSA survey has been running since 1983, and with some questions about the welfare state repeated in every survey, it provides the ability to track changes to public attitudes over the four decades. When the BSA survey started in 1983, at a time of a Conservative government, attitudes towards the welfare state were significantly more positive than they are now. When asked about levels of benefits, the majority felt they were too low (Curtice, 2020, p.99). This changed around the time of New Labour in the 1990’s, when attitudes became significantly more negative, with a clear majority believing benefit payments were too high. This continued every year and at the peak, in 2011, the results showed 62% believed they were too high, and 19% believed they were too low (Curtice, 2020, p.100). But in 2018, prior to Covid-19, results showed that difference had decreased significantly. 39% believed benefits were too high, versus 35% who believed they were too low (Curtice, 2020, p.101). This means Covid-19, the consequential unprecedented government interventions, and spending on the welfare state, arrived at a time when attitudes were already becoming more favorable. This makes the deservingness theory a ‘useful lense’ for investigating the ‘new phenomena’ (Van Oorschot et al., 2017, p.335) of Covid-19, as the theory can consider relative deservingness, rather than binary attitudes of ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving.’ There have already been some large UK based studies, seeking to explore the impact of Covid-19 on public attitudes towards the welfare state, including the deservingness of claimants, and the literature review will now consider these.

### ***Existing research into the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes towards the welfare state***

“*Solidarity in a crisis? Trends in attitudes to benefits during COVID-19*” was published in 2021 (de Vries et al.). It was a large study conducted in the UK and formed part of a national research project titled ‘*Welfare at a (social) distance*’. In addition, two BSA annual reports have been published since Covid-19 began, which explored attitudes towards the welfare state, summarised in a report from 2022 (Curtice et al.). All the research used quantitative methods and survey data and found no significant changes that suggested any long-term change could be attributed to Covid-19.

The 2022 paper explored findings from BSA surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 (Curtice et al.). All participants had taken part in the BSA surveys prior to Covid-19, providing the potential to track results from pre-Covid-19 and during Covid-19. When considering the statement, ‘If welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet,’ which has been asked since 1987, only a very small decrease was found. On average, 36% agreed, compared to an average of 39% across three surveys prior to Covid-19 (Curtice et al., 2022, p.10). Similar findings were found when considering the statement, ‘Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help.’ On average 42% disagreed in the BSA surveys pre-Covid-19, compared to 44% who disagreed with this during Covid-19 (Curtice et al., 2022, p.12). Similar findings were found across all data related to the welfare state. Although the differences were small, an analysis over a longer period shows a sharp change in pattern to more positive attitudes on average from 2016 onwards. The theory posited was that Covid-19 occurred at the same time as a recent shift to significantly more favorable attitudes, which could be attributed to a ‘thermostatic reaction against austerity’ (Curtice et al., 2022, p.19).

A limitation of the BSA findings is that they involved a methodological change for the surveys completed. Whereas the surveys had historically been completed face to face, surveys during the pandemic had to be completed online (Clery et al., 2021). Consideration, therefore, needs to be given to the risk that the findings could have been distorted; it is possible people will answer differently when speaking with someone, compared to the anonymity of the internet. It must also be noted that in one of the BSA surveys that had to be completed online, participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with statements and were also given a ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option. Due to the high proportion of ‘neither’ responses, this option was subsequently removed, to ‘encourage’ people to take a position (Clery et al., 2021, p.8). This speaks to one of the limitations of quantitative research for measuring attitudes towards the welfare state. In a study exploring methods used for understanding attitudes towards the welfare state, Gorres and Prinzen (2011) asked participants to complete a survey before taking part in focus group. They found that individuals can hold high levels of inconsistent, contradictory and ambivalent attitudes which should be carefully considered and not simply deemed unhelpful. Removing the ‘neither’ option, and forcing participants to have a definitive opinion means the BSA results should be taken carefully. Given the unique ways in which Covid-19 impacted people’s lives and the economy, pre-defined standardised survey questions may not be appropriate to explore and understand the nuances of any impact caused by Covid-19.

*“Solidarity in a crisis? Trends in attitudes to benefits during COVID-19”*, used responses from YouGov’s bimonthly ‘Welfare tracker’ survey between 2019 and 2021 (de Vries et al., 2021). Similarly to the BSA findings, de Vries et al. found that although there was a ‘statistically significant’ increase in the generosity of attitudes in the first and second wave of Covid-19, the changes were ‘small in relative terms’ (de Vries et al., 2021, p.13) when comparing surveys prior

to the pandemic. It was concluded they were unlikely to be permanent (de Vries et al., 2021, p.15). De Vries et al. outlined the ‘puzzle’ created by their findings: ‘why did a large influx of ‘more deserving claimants fail to produce a corresponding increase in welfare generosity’ (de Vries et al., 2021, p.24)?

Similarly to the BSA findings, it was pointed out that in 2013, 37.3% of participants in a YouGov study felt benefits were too high, whereas pre-Covid, this figure was 17.8%. This suggested a ‘floor effect’ limiting the impact from Covid-19 (de Vries et al., 2021, p.13).

However, a differing theory was also suggested, referred to as ‘Covid-exceptionalism’ (de Vries et al., 2021, p.16), hypothesizing that Covid-19 had impacted attitudes in a meaningful way, but specifically towards Covid-19 claimants and in a way that could not be captured by the existing survey. To examine this, de Vries et al., commissioned a further survey through YouGov which was conducted over May and June 2021 (de Vries et al., 2021, p.17).

In the survey, participants were asked to judge how blameworthy a benefit recipient was. This was designed to operationalise the ‘control’ aspect from the deservingness theory (de Vries et al., 2021, p.17). The results found that people did find the Covid-19 claimants more deserving.

Regarding retrospective blame (losing a job) the results showed 20.5% of participants felt pre-pandemic claimants were to blame for their unemployment, compared to only 4.4% of Covid-19 claimants. Regarding prospective blame (inability to find a job), results showed 31.8% of participants felt pre-pandemic claimants were to blame, compared to only 13.8% of Covid-19 claimants (de Vries et al., 2021, p.18).

The study has some of the same limitations identified related to pre-defined survey data.

Furthermore, although de Vries et al. addressed the deservingness of claimants, it only sought to

address the ‘control’ criterion, it did not seek to actively operationalise or explore the other CARIN criteria. The circumstances of Covid-19 could mean the public score Covid-19 claimants more highly on other criteria particularly identity and reciprocity for example. Furthermore, in comparing deservingness opinions over 2019 to 2021, the question included all benefit claimants which is a broad question. Given that the most visible intervention from the government has been around preventing unemployment, a gap exists to examine attitudes to specific target groups.

### ***Bridging the gap***

In conclusion, there is a strong theoretical position that Covid-19 could have impacted public opinion on the welfare state and the perceived deservingness of claimants, but a lack of qualitative research exploring this. This research aims to bridge this gap and argues that pre-defined survey questions may not adequately capture any impact caused by an unprecedented event such as Covid-19. Finally, existing research was conducted during the height of the pandemic. It is not possible for this dissertation to track changes over time, as the existing research was able to do, but there is a need to examine whether Covid-19 left any impact now it is no longer so visibly affecting daily life. This dissertation intends to explore this via qualitative methods. The next section will provide the methodology for the research.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

This section will provide the methodology for the research and its ontological and epistemological basis. It will outline the research design, and the methods used. Next, it will

outline the data collection and analysis, and finally, it will discuss the ethical considerations and the researcher's reflections.

### ***Research philosophy***

This researcher holds a social-constructive ontological position, and rather than seeking to uncover an 'external reality' or objective truth, believes that reality is under a 'constant state of construction and reconstruction' (Bryman, 2016, p.30). The existing research into the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes towards the welfare state has been dominated by a positivist approach, which assumes that objective findings can be observed through quantitative methods and pre-defined survey data (de Vries et al., 2021, Curtice et al., 2022). This researcher holds the contrasting epistemological position of interpretivism, that the world is socially constructed, and which emphasises the role of 'social action' in creating meaning and focuses on 'empathetic understanding' rather than an attempt to 'explain' human behaviour (Bryman, 2016, p.27). Therefore, the research design and methods need to reflect this.

### ***Research design***

The research design is an exploratory case study; a case study can be defined as 'an attempt to systematically investigate an event...with the specific aim of describing and explaining the phenomenon' (Lune and Berg, 2017, p.170). Exploratory case studies can be defined as 'exploring some social phenomenon in its natural and raw form...to seek the discovery of theory' (Lune and Berg, 2017, p.176). This is suitable for this inductive study exploring the impact of a unique event like Covid-19. As the research is being carried out by a sole researcher, a case study which focuses on one event, and the relatively small sample size often associated with case studies makes it an appropriate research design from a practical perspective.



Two frequent criticisms of case studies are that they can lack ‘rigor’ and their findings cannot be generalised (Hemel et al.,1991, p.23). This research does not aim to replicate the methods of natural science, which seeks to carry out ostensibly ‘objective’ research. Instead, it adopts the perspective that reality must be understood through detailed context-dependent analysis, which case studies can provide. Furthermore, as Yin (2018) suggests, a case study with a rigorous and transparent methodology can provide 'analytical generalisations' (p.21), that can contribute to expanding theories. The next sections will outline how this will be done.

### ***Research Method: Focus Groups***

To explore whether Covid-19 impacted people’s attitudes towards the welfare state, focus groups were conducted. Covid-19 was a collective experience, that impacted everyone in society in one way or another. Focus groups were chosen as the research method as they aim to encourage conversation between participants and can therefore allow observation of how participants ‘collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meaning around it’ (Bryman, 2016, p.503). The ‘group setting’ of a focus group can provide the opportunity for participants to ‘explore and clarify their views,’ in ways that would not be possible in a sole interview, for example (Kitzinger, 1996, p.299).

### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment for focus groups was carried out in June 2023, and four focus groups were conducted in the same month. Participants were recruited through posters placed on the internet, which is provided in the appendix. Through the websites Facebook and Reddit the poster was placed in local community groups across the UK, and in groups which had been set up for surveys and research. Given the small number of participants and qualitative nature of the

research, the eligibility criteria for participation were simply to be 18 and over, a UK resident, and to have access to the internet as the focus groups were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

The ideal size of a focus group is often suggested to be between six to 10 (Bryman, 2016, p.596). Taking into account the likelihood of dropouts, a maximum 10 participants were recruited for one focus group at a time, which meant the number of participants could be easily managed. There was a fairly high number of dropouts, but in total 17 participants were recruited across four focus groups. Focus groups are often conducted until a 'saturation point' is reached (Bryman, 2016, p505), i.e., the point at which the researcher feels no new themes are emerging. As the research was being carried out by one researcher, consideration had to be given to the amount of data it would be practical to collect and analyse. Ultimately, four focus groups were conducted, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

### *Microsoft Teams*

The focus groups were conducted via Microsoft Teams because the researcher felt it was likely to help with the recruitment process as the recruitment poster could be placed in nationwide groups, rather than being limited to a specific location. It was also likely to be more cost-effective and time-effective, as there would be no requirement to find a suitable room to book and the focus groups could be arranged at short notice. Using online technology to conduct research has been in place for some time, but Covid-19 led to significant increase in the widespread use and familiarity of digital technologies such as Microsoft Teams, not only for remote working but also for allowing people to communicate and to stay in touch during the national lockdowns and social distancing (Pandey et al., 2020). Based on this, it seemed unlikely that conducting the focus groups on Microsoft Teams would present a large barrier to

recruitment. However, the purpose of focus groups is to allow group interaction and collaborative conversation. Consideration was therefore given to whether the remote nature of Microsoft Teams would have any serious detriment towards this. Available research has found that when comparing online focus groups to in person, although there was a lower word count overall, the number of ‘unique ideas’ was the same (Richard, et al., 2021, p.32). Overall, the decision was made that the benefits of online focus groups outweighed any limitations.

### *The structure of the focus groups*

All focus groups started with a brief introduction from the researcher, reconfirming the study's purpose and a brief introduction from the participants to ensure their microphones were working. Participants were asked to have their camera turned on, if they felt comfortable with this, which the majority did. The focus groups were split into three sections, and the full topic guide is provided in the appendix. The first stage was a warmup exercise where participants were asked to share what came to mind when they heard the words, ‘the welfare state.’

For the second stage, participants were shown five vignettes representing different groups of people who receive benefits through the welfare state: a pensioner, someone who is unable to work due to sickness or disability, a single parent with young children, an unemployed person of working age, and finally, an unemployed person of working age who had lost their job either due to a national lockdown or were temporarily unable to work due to a national lockdown.

Participants were shown these vignettes one at a time and asked to discuss what kind of help and assistance they felt should be provided through the welfare state. The vignettes were deliberately vague, to ascertain what information participants would like to know, to enable them to come to a decision. Participants were also asked to rank these groups in order of their priority for help

through the welfare state. This section drew heavily on the vignette exercise used in a deservingness study carried out in 2020 (Laenen et al), with the added additions of someone impacted by a lockdown. It was intended to instigate discussions of Covid-19 and explore whether participants described clear differences between somebody unemployed or furloughed due to Covid-19 and someone unemployed for other reasons.

The final section of the focus group addressed Covid-19 directly. Participants were asked open questions about what they could recall about the welfare state and any issues during Covid-19. Participants were also asked about the Conservative government's decision to provide a £20 temporary uplift to Universal credit during the pandemic, whether they had heard about this and what they thought about the decision to reverse it. Participants were also asked direct questions that addressed differences between groups, for example, "What do you think were the main differences (if any) between people claiming Universal Credit before Covid-19 and people claiming Universal Credit during Covid-19?" At the end of the focus group, participants were asked if they would like to add any final comments that they had not had the opportunity to make.

### ***Analysis of data: Thematic Analysis***

Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate form of data analysis. Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis uses codes and coding as the basis for identifying and developing these themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.223). It is a commonly used approach and is cited as being an 'accessible' and 'robust' method for students (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79).

Having a robust and transparent approach is vital for ensuring the external reliability of the research. To ensure this, six steps are suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) when conducting thematic analysis. Firstly, familiarisation with the data, and secondly, ‘generating initial codes.’ The third step is ‘searching for themes,’ followed by the fourth and fifth steps of defining and naming the themes, before finally writing up the results (p.87). These steps were closely followed during the data analysis in this research, but it is also important to note that the coding and identifying of themes in thematic analysis is an ‘iterative’ process (Bryman, 2019, p.281). The process of coding for this research started after the first focus group. So, although the six steps were closely followed, the themes were under constant revision.

Each focus group recording was listened to at least four times to assist with the data transcribing, which led to familiarisation with the data. The coding frame was largely inductive, aside from the ‘CARIN’ criteria codes which were pre-defined. Once each of the focus group data was transcribed and anonymised, it was coded. Initial emerging themes were noted, and these were reviewed as subsequent focus group data was transcribed and anonymised. This continued until all the data was coded and an iterative review process was completed. Due to the inductive nature of the research, all data was coded before any decisions were made about what was important to the research to enable a ‘robust and detailed analytic interrogation’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p54).

The data for each focus group was also reviewed twice for coding, to ensure the process was ‘thorough and rigorous’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.69). The codes were initially as close to participant’s words as possible. It was then possible to review all of the codes and group together those that were saying the same thing, or something very similar, together under one code.

The coding framework was then used for analysis of the emergence of prominent themes. The codes identified act as ‘the smallest unit of analysis,’ for the buildings blocks’ to identify themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.51). Taking into account Braun and Clarke’s definition of themes as ‘patterns anchored by a shared idea, meaning or concept’ (2021, p43), the presence of themes was examined through ‘repetitions,’ ‘similarities and differences,’ and ‘theory-related material’ from the initial codes (Bryman, 2019, p.280).

Although participants were encouraged to engage with one another, as much as possible, the topic guide's structure meant that the same areas were covered in all four focus groups and the themes identified were present in all groups. The full coding frame is provided in the appendix.

#### *Nvivo*

Coding was performed using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software, Nvivo. Nvivo provides a more time efficient method of coding, as opposed to coding manually by hand. Using Nvivo as a means of assistance for coding also helps with external reliability of the research as it allows for the potential auditability for the analysis.

#### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical approval was provided through Birkbeck’s School of Social Sciences, History & Philosophy. It has been argued there are four main ethical principles to consider when planning and conducting research: whether there is any deception, whether there is any invasion of privacy, the ability to provide informed consent, and the likelihood of any harm to the participant (Bryman, 2017, p.125). The recruitment poster explained the researcher was seeking participants to take part in a study called ‘Understanding public opinion on the welfare state.’ Participants were not explicitly told that the research focus was on Covid-19, to allow the exploration of any

spontaneous conversations about it. Although the exact research question was not provided, there was no deception about the overall research topic, and Covid-19 was openly discussed as part of the sessions.

Participants interested in taking part were asked to email the researcher for more information. An information sheet was then sent with further details about the study, how the data would be used, the right to withdraw and confirmation of confidentiality and anonymity for all participants in any research outputs. If the participant wanted to proceed, they were then asked to sign a consent form confirming the same information. The information sheet and consent form can be found in the appendix. The focus groups were recorded, with consent, on Microsoft Teams. The recordings were stored securely until they had been transcribed and fully anonymised. The recordings were then deleted.

Consideration was given to whether there could be adverse effects on the participants resulting from participation. The study did not involve contact with vulnerable people and the topic was unlikely to be inherently psychologically or emotionally distressing. Any potential safety issues that could arise from an 'in person' focus group were reduced by the focus groups being conducted online. Participants did not have to disclose any personal information, other than their name if they felt comfortable doing so, and there was no requirement to turn on their cameras unless they felt comfortable doing so.

The recruitment poster also explained a £10 shopping voucher would be provided after the focus group as a thank you for participants' time. The decision to offer an incentive was taken to improve the prospects of recruitment and a self-funded budget of £200 was set aside. It was felt

£10 was an appropriate amount for a 90-minute session and was unlikely to cause any undue inducement.

### ***Researcher reflection***

I recognise that, as a researcher, I may unintentionally bring my own individual perspectives and assumptions to this study. Although this researcher believes that as we live in a social world, no observer is ever ‘truly objective,’ (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p.19), it is important to address this and to be aware of it. Unfortunately, as a sole researcher, it was not possible to cross-reference my findings with other researchers or colleagues. To attempt to remain aware and vigilant to any potential assumptions, and attempt to minimise any biases, a research journal was kept, to record the research process and to record my ongoing reflections and ensure consistent critical engagement with the data.

## **Chapter four: Findings and discussion**

This section will present the research findings and the themes identified, with reference to the research questions and aims of this dissertation. It will analyse these findings and consider their significance, given the relevant literature and existing research.

The aim of this study was to explore whether Covid-19 had impacted attitudes towards the welfare state, and attitudes towards deservingness, and in turn impacted support for the welfare state. Three overarching themes were identified from the data:

1. An increased awareness of some of the realities of the welfare state



2. Deservingness and Covid-exceptionalism
3. Post Covid-19: The need for ongoing support for the most vulnerable

***An increased awareness of some of the realities of the welfare state***

The first theme addresses how attitudes towards the welfare state were altered by Covid-19.

Although the results do not necessarily suggest that any of the participants in these focus groups had a shift in attitude from ‘anti-welfare’ to ‘pro-welfare’ as a result of the pandemic, the findings do suggest that Covid-19 impacted attitudes through specific Covid-related events. This brought an increased awareness of the difficulties faced by some of those relying on the welfare state.

To understand whether there was any impact on participants’ attitudes towards the welfare state, it was helpful to initially explore general attitudes towards it. The focus groups started with broad open questions. There was a wide consensus that the welfare state is a necessary safety net which provides help for vulnerable people. When asked whether the welfare state was something good, bad, or neutral, it was commonly referred to as something ‘good.’ Despite the belief that the welfare state was something which could, in theory, offer protection and attempt to provide equality, the erosion of the welfare state was discussed, and there was widespread anger expressed at the current government and the previous coalition government's handling of the welfare state. This is exemplified by Participant three:

*“I think...the welfare state is good, but I think at the moment it's just kind of eroding slightly. I don't know. I don't think the government, really, they're not really honouring their contract.”* (Participant three, group four)

Some participants suggested that there can be negative connotations associated with the welfare state, but this was in general terms, through other people's opinions or media portrayals, rather than direct opinions; for example:

*"Sometimes it has some negative connotations... projected by the media, for example, and some people have some criticisms over how it's run." (Participant two, group two)*

However, overall, there was a positive attitude towards the welfare state in principle.

When later asked to share anything they had been aware of during Covid-19, regarding the welfare state, participants discussed and provided specific examples that they felt showed how difficult things can be for some. In addition, participants expressed an increased sense that it was important for the welfare state to protect the most vulnerable. Participants expressed a lack of confidence in the welfare state being fit for purpose to do this, shown here by a quote from Participant two:

*"I think it [Covid-19] highlighted the disparity between rich and poor. So, I think simply putting it, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. And so, I think it exposed the vulnerabilities within the [welfare] system." (Participant two, group two).*

There was a sense expressed that the government did not understand the realities some people faced, and that public money was available during the pandemic, but this was not used fairly. Narratives centered around the belief that the government could not be trusted to act fairly during the pandemic, to ensure that the welfare state fairly provided for the most vulnerable in society. There was a high level of reported awareness about the financial controversies the government had been involved in during Covid-19; for example participants spoke passionately about

millions of pounds of public money being wasted on personal protective equipment (PPE) that was not useable, and insufficient checks being carried out on bounce back loans. The perception across the groups was that this was unfair, and this translated into a sense that the money could have been better spent on those who needed it and those who were vulnerable and more deserving. This is exemplified by the following extract from group three:

*“Does anybody remember hearing or seeing anything in the news about the welfare state during the pandemic?” (Researcher)*

*“Yeah....the only thing I heard was that was people abusing the um... what was it called?” (Participant one)*

*“Bounce back [loans]...I know first-hand that people took out bounce back, loans and then liquidated their companies....You've just given a 30 grand to someone who's liquidated their companies...And then you could have taken that 30 grand and given it to someone much more deserving of it, cause you're scrapping over, like, I don't know, hundred quid a week for disability allowance, and then you hand someone 30 grand without any proper diligence.” (Participant three)*

Previous research that has found when the public see government spending as inefficient and ‘poorly controlled and inherently wasteful’ (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2018, p.919), this can impact their confidence in the welfare state. Covid-19 provided clear and tangible examples of what participants felt was wasteful, which impacted their levels of trust in the government and sense of fairness.

There was a strikingly unanimous, and unchallenged, response across all groups, that the government's decision to end the temporary uplift of £20 to Universal Credit was the wrong decision. Out of the 17 participants, almost all confirmed that they had heard about the removal of the £20 temporary uplift. The strength of feeling shown by participants about this is exemplified in the following responses from group two and group four.

*"I felt it was, dare I say it, a nasty thing to do."* (Participant one, group two)

*"I just thought it was pretty stingy. I don't think it was the right decision. I don't think it was that much for the government, but I think it would have made a big difference to those on the lowest salaries."* (Participant three, group four)

These findings can be read in line with the 2021 study (de Vries et al.), carried out before the £20 was taken away, which found that 63% of respondents supported the temporary uplift while it was in place, and 50% supported this being a permanent change (p.25). However, it is important to consider whether the discussions and findings could have been impacted by social desirability bias, and whether participants who felt differently did not feel comfortable expressing this against the majority view. However, there was no requirement for a participant to engage with every part of the session, yet most participants chose to actively express a negative opinion towards the decision to remove the temporary uplift.

For those who had not heard about either the temporary uplift, or its removal, this topic was an example of the focus group format allowing participants to negotiate meaning within the existing narratives of the focus group. The following extract from group one demonstrates this.

Participant two and Participant three had previously confirmed they had not been aware of the temporary uplift or the government's decision to remove it.

*“I was [aware of the decision to remove the £20 uplift]. I thought it was really mean ...When they withdrew it, I thought it was terrible.”* (Participant six)

*“But why did they do it? Why did they not like people so much? That's what it feels like sometimes, like, why do they not like the public? Is it just so they can keep it all themselves?”* (Participant one)

*“It's also a really weird one, because it's like, furlough was paid... quite generously, you know...what was that, 80% of your pay or something?”* (Participant three)

*“Yeah, it was, I thought. And the bounce back loans as well.”* (Participant one)

*“And you can imagine that these households that may or may not have had children in them all of a sudden, in a full house for three months, were using higher rates of gas, electricity, water. Am I right in saying that people that, I mean, I don't know, because I'm not on it, but Universal Credit, they still get electricity bills, right? So, all their bills would have increased and yet they got less money and everyone else in the country is getting paid at least 80% of well, not everyone in the country, whoever was qualified for that furlough, just seems nuts.”* (Participant one, group one)

The importance of media and social media during the pandemic was also apparent in shaping the views of participants with regards to the temporary uplift. Participants shared experiences that made them more sympathetic to people claiming benefits:

*“[I] remember on Facebook I saw a few people saying how much that will impact them and you're sitting down and thinking £20 is not a lot of money, but to somebody it makes a huge difference. So that really surprised me, and I was feeling quite sad for the families that that got taken away from.” (Participant three, group two)*

And

*“The association I have with the £20 extra was that people were saying it's a difference between going to a food bank...and feeling you know, a lot of young mothers, that were on the television were saying that they could either feed the children or if that was taken away, they'd have to access the food banks more.” (Participant one, group three)*

These findings are important, as it has been argued that when attention is drawn to the failings and inadequacy within the welfare state, it may impact the ‘indifference,’ that has previously been noted from the public and may cause more difficulties for any government seeking to impose any further cuts (Ryan, 2020, cited in Orton and Sarkar, 2023, p5). Furthermore, for some participants, this translated into clear support for increased public spending for the most vulnerable, shown in this extract:

*“In the big scheme of things, yes, we're talking about a large amount I guess, across the people who were receiving it, but to those of us, you know, on decent wages with decent disposable income...versus....somebody who that would make a huge difference in terms of what they could do to feed themselves or feed their children...I would have been more than happy to pay more tax to ensure that continued. (Participant one, group two)*

The topics discussed by participants were widely reported by the media. In addition, not only did the media report a need for welfare policies that acted as ‘safety net’ during the pandemic (Knapman and Evans, 2020), but this language was also used by Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time. It was noted that it had been almost 20 years since the language of a ‘safety net,’ to describe the welfare state had been used by the government (Richards-Gray, 2020). Therefore, the idea that the most vulnerable needed to be ‘protected’ by the welfare state may have been influenced by public discourse during Covid-19.

Research has also shown that the sense of ‘fairness’ is an important factor in shaping the public’s opinion and attitudes towards the welfare state (Hoggett et al., 2013). The sense of fairness is often expressed through a division of the hard worker versus the workshy claimant, for example (Taylor-Gooby, 2019), and it has been argued the government deliberately creates this sense of unfairness to popularise welfare cuts and develop a ‘antiwelfare populism’ (Hoggett et al., 2013, p.568). However, in this research, the widely accepted narrative was to discuss the way in which the most vulnerable relying on the welfare state had been failed by the government, and with any anger or discontent directed solely towards the government. The sense of unfairness expressed, and the division discussed, was between those in charge, or the government, versus the public and the most vulnerable in society. Overall, the findings support the idea that Covid-19 had some impact on attitudes towards the welfare state. It also suggests that alternative discourses about the welfare state are possible and are likely to be influenced by media portrayals and public discourse.

### ***Deservingness and Covid-exceptionalism***

The next theme addresses the ways in which deservingness attitudes were tested or re-shaped during the pandemic. The findings suggest deservingness attitudes were tested by increased visibility and experience of benefits and unemployment and furlough schemes. However, despite the large loss of jobs leading to an increased uptake of Universal Credit and the furlough scheme for example, participants still felt priority for help needed to go towards the elderly first, then the sick and disabled and those with children, before those of working age in good health that were unemployed. In addition, the findings found evidence of 'Covid-exceptionalism' within deservingness attitudes.

*A 'universal dimension of support'*

To explore whether Covid-19 had impacted the perceived deservingness of benefit recipients, participants were shown five vignettes representing different groups of people who receive benefits through the welfare state: a pensioner, someone who is unable to work due to sickness or disability, a single parent with young children, an unemployed person of working age, and finally an unemployed person of working age who had lost their job either due to a national lockdown or were temporarily unable to work due to a national lockdown. After discussing the type of help that should be provided, participants were asked which groups they felt should be treated as a priority for help from the government and the welfare state. They were asked to rank these groups in order of their priority for help through the welfare state. Participants commonly found this difficult to do, exemplified by the following comment:

*"Yeah, I mean it's... it is a bit the impossible task isn't it..But yeah, the whole list is a worthy set of people, isn't it?"* (Participant three, group one)



Apart from one participant who said they would be against ranking the groups, participants were able to attempt to complete the exercise. In line with normative principles and existing research (van Oorschot, 2006), participants generally suggested the elderly first, followed by the sick and disabled, as these groups were seen as the most vulnerable in society. Lone parents with children were generally suggested as the next priority group. When discussing their choices, participants referred most commonly to the ‘control’ someone had over their situation, followed by their ‘need.’ ‘Reciprocity’ was discussed only with reference to the elderly claiming a pension. There were no discussions that could be attributed to the ‘identity’ or ‘attitude,’ elements of the CARIN criteria (van Oorschot, 2000). There were no discussions amongst participants about Covid-19 when considering these three groups.

Participants found it easier to call out first priorities and justify these decisions than those who would rank last:

*“Did you manage to rank one in last place?”* (Researcher)

*“No, (laughing) it's quite tricky.”* (Participant two, group four)

However, no group suggested someone of working age claiming unemployment in their top three rankings, making the two unemployment scenarios last by default. This suggests that the increased visibility of people unable to work during Covid-19, the increase in people needing to claim Universal Credit, or government spending on furlough schemes and increased spending on Universal Credit has not impacted Coughlin’s (1980) ‘universal dimension of support’ (cited in van Oorschot, 2000, p.35).

However, there was evidence of Covid-19 impacting attitudes towards deservingness and the idea of ‘control’ or ‘blame’ through personal experience. For example, prior to showing the

vignette of someone impacted by a national lockdown, and Covid-19 being proactively brought into the conversation, Participant three drew on their personal experience of losing their job during Covid-19. They had been working on a self-employed basis in construction during the pandemic, but were unable to work due to the national lockdown rules and regulations. When asked to consider what kind of help should be provided through the welfare state to an unemployed person of working age, Participant three said:

*“I think it depends...what the employment market is like, that they are in, and it depends on the industry they're in. If you're in construction and construction goes down the pan, and you've worked for the last 10 years, and you find yourself in a situation where you actually can't get work because the industry's collapsed. Are you expected to take any old job...or can you hold off until you find a job that is similar to what you had?”* (Participant three, group three)

Later, when talking about Covid-19 directly, Participant three explained that they had initially applied for Universal Credit, but eventually had been able to use the SEISS that was subsequently created. This is an example of someone who may not have expected to have ever needed to claim unemployment benefits, had it not been for Covid-19. The worry at the thought of having to rely on the welfare state and its conditionality appeared to have left an impact, and suggests that direct experience with the welfare state during Covid-19 impacted their attitude towards the conditionality that should be placed on unemployment benefits.

Others expressed a sense of feeling lucky that they had been able to continue working during Covid-19:

*“You realise how quickly things can change...because I was in a position where I thought I'd never have to rely on the welfare state... I didn't have to at the time, but it kind of made me think...because at the time, I was planning on going into a job that was a bit more volatile contracting wise and it made me think that, wow, OK. If I'd made that decision, I would have had to, erm I would have fallen into the category where I would have needed to.”* (Participant two, group one).

Although Participant two does not explicitly state that, consequently, he has more support for the welfare state, the implicit consequence of this reflection could be interpreted as increased empathy with people who do find themselves in a situation where they need help. However, consideration should be given about how far this attitude goes, or whether this is bound more closely to the specific circumstances of Covid-19, and ‘Covid-exceptionalism.’

### ***‘Covid-exceptionalism’***

Some participants expressed views that suggested people who had to claim benefits because they were impacted by Covid-19 were more deserving than those otherwise claiming benefits. The findings therefore showed some evidence for the idea de Vries et al. (2021) have named ‘Covid-exceptionalism’ (p.16). In the current research, participants expressed views that supported the idea of ‘Covid-exceptionalism,’ in a largely implicit way, rather than explicitly. In the context of the CARIN deservingness criteria (van Oorschot 2020), these views were typically based on the perceived idea of the level of control that someone had over their situation, or the blame that could be attributed to them. The implicit suggestion was that it was otherwise possible for unemployed people to find a job, exemplified here by Participant one, who was considering the

vignette showing an unemployed person impacted by a national lockdown and the help that should be provided:

*“And that should be unequivocal for everybody [impacted by Covid-19]. I don't think that's up for debate because, that's, you're backed into a corner there. That's definitely out of your hands.”* (Participant one, group three)

Participant one, from group four, drew on personal experience:

*“I don't know if anyone lost their job during lockdown, but I was definitely furloughed, and during that time I did try to get another job and it was incredibly hard... so if it was due to lock down, I can understand why it was that they were unemployed.”* (Participant one, group four)

Notably, there was no reference to the CARIN criteria of ‘reciprocity’ or ‘identity,’ for the unemployed groups impacted by a national lockdown. This may have been expected, given that there were large numbers of people who lost their jobs, who had been consistently working previously, and would otherwise have been unlikely to have needed assistance through the welfare state.

‘Covid-exceptionalism’ was not a consensus across all groups. Some participants felt there was no clear differentiation between the two groups and others felt it would depend on the circumstances, and that means testing would be necessary in both scenarios, i.e. that determining a person’s level of ‘need’ was important. This is in line with other findings that found discussions in the UK were dominated by the idea of ‘need’ and means testing (Laenen et al., 2020). One participant went further, explaining they had less sympathy for someone impacted by Covid-19:

*“I think a part of me wants to tell [both vignettes for unemployed people of working age and good health] to look for something to do... I think a part of me wants to do that because in situations where you don't have the government, you kind of fend for yourself.”* (Participant three, group two)

*“And is that the same... even taking into account [they are unable to work] due to a national lockdown?”* (Researcher)

*“For me, yes, to be honest, because I'll be expecting [person unable to work due to Covid-19] to at least have planned and I know this is being a little bit harsh, ... And so that that money can go towards somebody who actually really needs it more than they do.”* (Participant three, group two)

This suggests that neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and minimal government intervention are entrenched for some, regardless of the circumstances, particularly regarding unemployment benefit. It speaks to other research that suggests unemployed claimants can be associated with negative traits such as laziness or having less self-responsibility (van Oorshot, 2006).

Building on the idea of ‘Covid-exceptionalism’, was an idea expressed in group one about the reduced stigma that participants expected would be associated with someone needing help because they had been made unemployed due to Covid-19, as opposed to someone unemployed for other reasons:

*“I'd have thought maybe it was a bit less because it was a pure necessity, and it was kind of beyond their control, and a lot more people were claiming then, a lot of people were in the same boat. So, they had no other choice.”* (Participant one, group one)

*“Yeah, I'd agree with that...when you go into that situation where there's just widespread crisis...the stigma...I would say, is reduced. Not that there should be any stigma, but in reality...it seems to happen.” (Participant five, group one)*

Being able to explore specific Covid-19-related events through the focus group provided the ability to understand the particular and specific ways Covid-19 impacted attitudes towards the welfare state and deservingness, as opposed to the pre-defined BSA survey questions used (Curtice et al, 2022) that considered the welfare state as a whole. Orton and Sarkar (2023) have argued it is important to recognise the difference in attitudes towards different parts of the welfare state, in order to challenge the accepted idea of the ‘anti-welfare orthodoxy,’ that is widely found through survey data and polls, because the public can have different views, depending on who the recipient is ‘imagined to be’ (Orton and Sarkar, 2023, p.16). This links to the deserving theory, and the way some groups are seen as inherently more deserving than others (van Oorchot, 2000), and is supported by the findings of this dissertation.

Overall, the findings suggest that Covid-19 had some impact on deservingness attitudes. The collective crisis of Covid-19 may have fostered a sense of empathy and solidarity towards claimants, but this was largely directed towards those participants assumed to be the most vulnerable in society, rather than to the welfare state overall.

### ***Post Covid-19: The need for ongoing support for the most vulnerable***

The findings of this research suggest that, as a result of the two earlier themes discussed, participants had a willingness for increased support and spending, for those deemed most vulnerable, or deserving. Although the objective of this dissertation was to explore the impact of

Covid-19 on attitudes towards the welfare state, it is important to take into account the context of the circumstances when Covid-19 started, as well as the current circumstances. Curtice et al. (2022) hypothesized that the change in direction over the last few years towards more favourable attitudes towards the welfare state has been caused by a ‘thermostatic’ reaction to austerity and cuts implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition in 2010 (p.19). Overall, the findings in this research support this hypothesis. Participants also expressed anger at cuts towards the welfare state from the current government and the cost-of-living crisis was also an important factor discussed. The following extract from group one shows the way the ideal of the welfare state is compared to the perceived reality of it today:

*“[The welfare state] is a sort of way of preventing parts of society from spiraling down into extreme poverty and the social impact that costs. So, it’s developed over time to improve the health of the nation and...to improve everyone’s social standing.”* (Participant five)

*“I think it was that, but it’s been decimated over recent years, to be honest...it should provide a standard of living where, you know, people can survive if you know, misfortune strikes, whether that’s health or disability or unemployment or whatever...but I think it’s so...and insignificant now, the amount of support is shockingly bad.”*  
(Participant six)

*“Is that an opinion that you’ve always held, or is that something that’s developed over time or changed?”* (Researcher)

*“I think it’s got worse, and particularly since coalition government.”* (Participant six)

*“Sorry, just to caveat what I was saying before. I thought we were talking more generally about the welfare state rather than how is it the moment. Umm, I think that 13 real years of the Tory government has really taken a hammer to it.”* (Participant five)

These opinions came from personal experiences, or stories of friend’s, families, and colleagues.

It was also common for participants to offer personal stories about their own, or friends and family, negative experiences of Universal Credit. Participants discussed delays in receiving initial Universal Credit payments causing financial difficulty, and the belief that being on Universal Credit meant it was a struggle to pay for childcare.

Ultimately, it seems that Covid-19 occurred at a time when attitudes were already becoming more positive, based on a thermostatic reaction towards the government’s actions and cuts. This could also be seen to support the findings of de Vries et al. (2021), who concluded that this resulted in a ‘floor effect,’ potentially limiting any significant impact from Covid-19. However, the ‘floor effect’ should not underestimate the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes towards the welfare state. As previously discussed, the findings suggest that attitudes towards the welfare state and deservingness attitudes were impacted, but in a way that was directed to those assumed to be most deserving rather than the welfare state as a whole. Despite acknowledgement of the cost of living crisis, some participants expressed the view that having understood how difficult things were, for some, relying on the welfare state during Covid-19, they would be willing to pay more to support those that were deemed most deserving. Curtice et al., (2021) have hypothesized that given the evidence for the public’s thermostatic reaction to public spending and the unprecedented costs involved in the spending on the welfare state during Covid-19, the future public opinion will be that government spending should fall again (p.13). However, the findings



of this research suggest this is not a given. When discussing the additional spending of £20 for Universal Credit and the unfair decision to remove it, there was no conversation about whether there was a need for this or whether it could be afforded, given the current cost of living crisis, for example. Participants did not define which target group they were referring to, but the assumption was that there were many people who deserved the additional help. For example:

*I think...now...as we're in a cost of living crisis, [and] Covid-19 has contributed to that. So...we're still living with the effects of it. And things are even more expensive now than they were then. So, it seems really harsh to take away something that's really substantial to those families in an environment where things are even more expensive than they were before. (Participant Two, group two)*

Participant three, who had previously explained she had little sympathy for someone unemployed during Covid-19 and claiming unemployment benefit, expressed the following view:

*"I think it [the decision to remove the £20 uplift] showed the government's lack of understanding of how much it costs to run like a family, and because we're fighting over £20 and that was incredibly surprising." (Participant three, group two)*

The findings did not suggest participants felt the principles of the welfare state should be transformed. When discussing the welfare state generally, participants discussed the importance of means-testing, and determining someone's need, in line with widely found attitudes within existing research. However, the findings do suggest that, if a persuasive argument is presented,

there may be support for increased spending in the welfare state in the future, for those deemed most in need, or deserving.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

The aims of this study were two-fold. Firstly, to explore whether Covid-19 impacted public attitudes towards the welfare state. Secondly, to explore whether Covid-19 impacted perceptions of the deservingness of welfare recipients, and in turn support for the welfare state. Through this research it has been demonstrated that Covid-19 did impact attitudes towards the welfare state. A key finding of this research relates to the temporary uplift of £20 towards Universal Credit and the subsequent decision to remove it. There was a strong consensus across all groups that this was the wrong decision. Due to the media coverage and general awareness of this matter, Covid-19 led to an increased awareness of how difficult things can be for some people and participants expressed the feeling that, during the pandemic, the welfare state was not providing adequate support to who they perceived as the most vulnerable. There was also a strong sense of distrust for the government that came from other specific Covid-19 events, versus the level of empathy and sympathy expressed to those relying on the welfare state and a feeling money could have been better spent on those who needed it. Participants expressed a sense of unfairness about this. Deservingness attitudes were tested by increased use and visibility of parts of the welfare state. Participants expressed feeling lucky they did not need to rely on it and shared personal stories of direct contact with the welfare state during the pandemic. However, the findings of this research do not suggest Covid-19 transformed deservingness attitudes. Participants felt priority for help

needed to go to the elderly, sick and disabled and those with children before those who were unemployed. The findings also found some support for 'Covid-exceptionalism' as well as a 'floor effect,' which may mean that moving forward, some the impact of Covid-19 on attitudes is limited. However, another key finding of this research was that participants expressed the view that having understood how difficult things were for some those that were deemed most deserving and assumed most vulnerable relying on the welfare state during Covid-19, they felt that the government should be offering more ongoing financial support, and would be willing to pay more in taxes to provide this support. Overall, there was a sense that for some of the participants, the welfare state should be the 'engine of social cohesion' that Taylor-Gooby believes it should be (2016, p.729) and through the findings of this dissertation, it is argued that the impact of Covid-19 furthered this view.

#### *Limitations of the study and future research*

A limitation of this study is that it has been carried out by a sole researcher with a relatively small number of participants. It is proposed that future research could use the same methods, but with larger groups and additional researchers so results can be cross referenced. Given the current climate and ongoing 'cost-of-living crisis,' further exploration is needed about how the public distinguishes between those deemed most deserving and those less so, to help understand the basis of support for future public spending. Future research could also explore the idea of fairness, and how this was impacted by Covid-19, in more detail.

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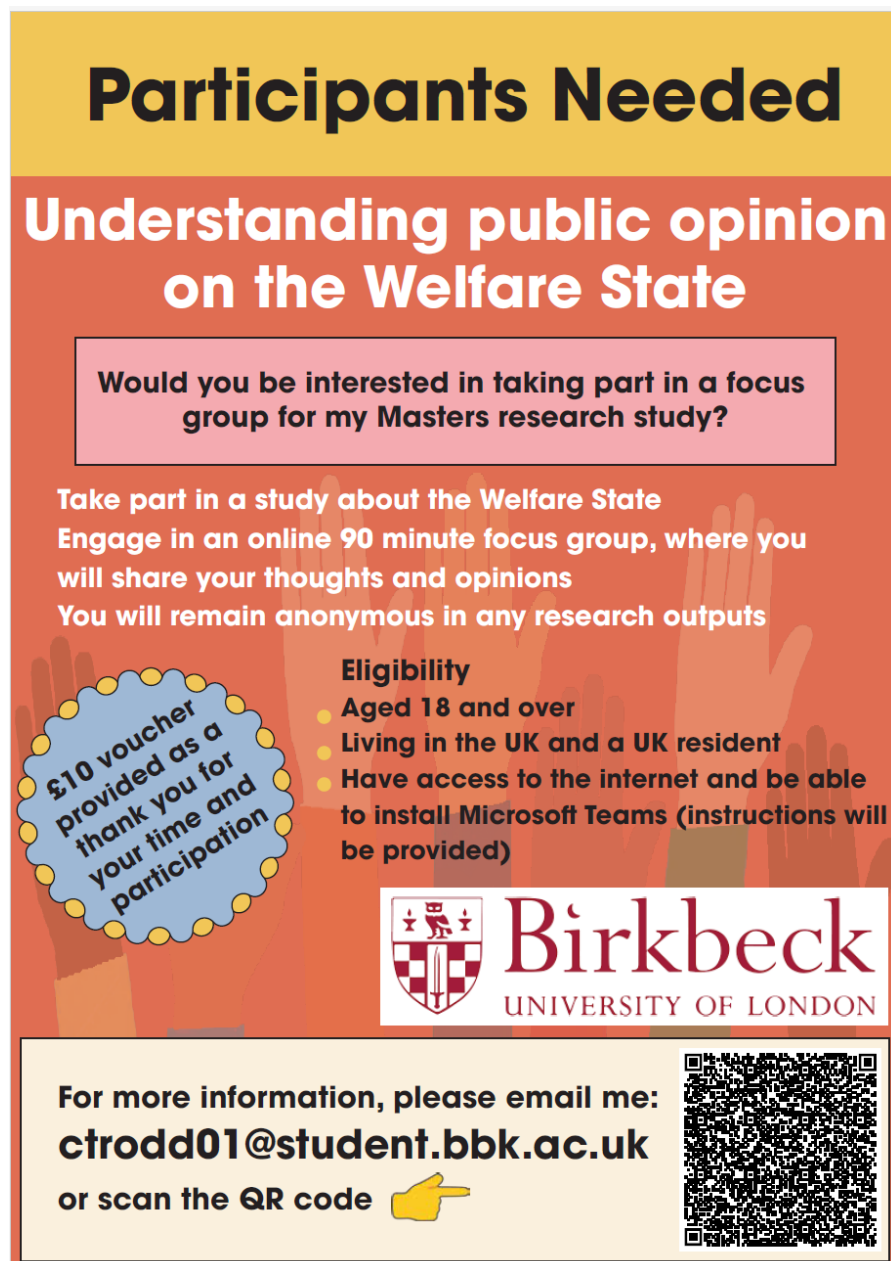
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: recruitment poster



# Participants Needed

## Understanding public opinion on the Welfare State


Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group for my Masters research study?


Take part in a study about the Welfare State  
Engage in an online 90 minute focus group, where you will share your thoughts and opinions  
You will remain anonymous in any research outputs


**£10 voucher provided as a thank you for your time and participation**

**Eligibility**

- Aged 18 and over
- Living in the UK and a UK resident
- Have access to the internet and be able to install Microsoft Teams (instructions will be provided)

 **Birkbeck**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

For more information, please email me:  
**ctrodd01@student.bbk.ac.uk**  
or scan the QR code 





## Appendix 2: research information sheet

School of Social Sciences, History & Philosophy

BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

INFORMATION SHEET FOR:

A study exploring public attitudes towards the Welfare State

Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. A member of the research team can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

This research project aims to explore how members of the public feel about the Welfare State. This study will be completed by 15 September 2023.

You can participate in this study because you have confirmed you are over 18

and you are a UK resident. As this is a general discussion about the Welfare state and benefits, you don't need any prior knowledge, and you do not need to be in receipt of benefits to take part. You won't be asked whether you receive any welfare benefits.

In this study, you will take part in a discussion where you will be asked to share your thoughts and opinions in response to questions about the Welfare State. This will take place online, through Microsoft Teams and will last for no longer than 90 minutes.

In return for participation in the discussion, you will receive a £10 voucher, which will be emailed to you directly after the session.

The results of this project will be written up for a Masters' dissertation. This will be completely anonymised, and no real names will be used in the project, so that there is no way to identify any individual or attribute any comments to an individual.

You have the right to withdraw participation at any point up until the point that the anonymised data can no longer be identified. This will take place no later than six weeks after the focus group has taken place.

The project has received ethical approval.

Primary researcher contact details:

Name: Chloe Trodden Email address: [ctrodd01@student.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ctrodd01@student.bbk.ac.uk)

For information about Birkbeck's data protection policy please visit: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/policies/privacy#7>

If you have concerns about this study, please contact the School's Ethics Officer, Dr Sarah Marks at: [sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk)

Dr Sarah Marks

Dept of History, Classics & Archaeology

Birkbeck, University of London<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

London WC1E 7HX

You also have the right to submit a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office

<https://ico.org.uk/>

### **Appendix 3: focus group consent form**

#### **School of Social Sciences, History & Philosophy BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

##### **CONSENT FORM FOR:** *A study exploring public attitudes towards the Welfare State*

I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that I will remain anonymous and that all the information given will be used for this study only.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the study at any time without giving any reason and to decline to answer particular questions. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the point that the anonymised data can no longer be identified.

I understand that audio/video recordings will be made and that recordings will be identified by a code, and stored in a password protected folder. The recording will not be used or made available for any purposes other than the research project. The recordings will be destroyed once the recordings have been transcribed and fully anonymised. This will be no more than six weeks after the focus group has taken place.

I understand that all information given will be kept confidential. All data will be identified by a code, with personal details kept in a locked file or secure computer with access only by the immediate researchers. All personal data will be kept separate from research data. Personal data will be destroyed once the recordings have been transcribed and fully anonymised. This will be no more than six weeks after the focus group has taken place.

I understand how the results of the study will be used. Results will be written up for a project. The data will be totally anonymous, without any means of identifying the individuals involved.

I confirm that I am over 18 years of age.

**There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one retained by the researcher for records.**

Name (participant): \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (researcher): \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary investigator contact details:

Name: Chloe Trodden

Email address: [ctrodd01@student.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ctrodd01@student.bbk.ac.uk)

Supervisor contact details:

Name: Dr Laura Richards-Gray,

Email address: [l.richards-gray@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:l.richards-gray@bbk.ac.uk)

## Appendix 4: topic guide

### Topic guide for focus group

## Part 1: Introduction:

Hello and thank you all for coming. My name is Chloe, and I will be running this discussion.

The purpose of this session is to explore how members of the public feel about the Welfare State.

As I explained in the email sent in advance of this session, this is a general discussion about the Welfare state and benefits.

You don't need to have any expert or detailed knowledge – this focus group is about public opinion. You do not need to be in receipt of benefits to take part and you will not be asked whether you receive any welfare benefits.

### **Admin:**

The session will last for no longer than 90 minutes. We will start with some questions, then move on to look at some case studies. I will leave some room at the end for any last comments and questions.

The discussion will be recorded, so that I can listen back if needed, and I will also be making some notes throughout.

When I come to writing up the research, all personal data will have been removed. I will not use your name or any identifying information.

In return for participation in the discussion, you will receive a £10 voucher, which will be emailed to you directly after the session.

My role will be to facilitate the conversation. It is likely that there will be differing opinions and I want to hear from everyone. Please be respectful of one another and try not to speak over anyone else speaking. Please feel free to use the group chat function and turn on your camera on, if you feel comfortable with this.

As I would like to hear from everyone, I may specifically ask for your opinion if some people have been able to talk for longer than others. And as we don't want to run over the 90 minutes, there might be times when I have to interject and move the conversation on.

Are there any questions before we begin?

Group intro's - very briefly, we'll go round and introduce ourselves, just your name

### **Part 2: Warm up exercise**

I'd like you to share what comes to mind when you hear the words 'Welfare State.' What does it mean to you?

#### **Potential prompts**

- *Is the Welfare State a good thing, bad thing or something neutral? Why?*
- *Do you see any problems with the Welfare state?*
- *Have you always held that opinion?*
- *Is there anything that has changed your opinion?*

### **Part 3: Deservingness**

Exercise 2: Rank vignettes in order of priority.

*This exercise is intended to instigate further conversations about Covid-19. Intended to probe how deserving participants perceive each target group to be. Which of the CARIN criteria (i.e. Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity & Need) are spontaneously discussed? Are there similarities or differences between 3, 4, & 5?*

We are going to run through some examples of people who need to claim benefits, and people whose ability to work has been impacted.

I will now show the case study examples on screen. I'd like you to think about:

Vignettes (These are deliberately vague, to see what information participants would like to know, to come to a decision).

- A. Someone who is unable to work due to sickness or disability
- B. An unemployed person of working age, who is in good health
- C. An unemployed person of working age, who is in good health, who has lost their job due to a national lockdown, or temporarily unable to work due to a national lockdown, .i.e they have been furloughed.
- D. A lone parent, who is in good health
- E. A pensioner, who is in good health

*Intended to crystallize opinions held by participants, and prompt qualifications of opinion through the group exercise.*

- Bearing in mind that the Welfare State caters for lots of people and there are limited resources, would you say certain groups should be prioritised for help and assistance through the Welfare State?
- I would now like you to rank these in order of priority for the government in terms of their need for benefits. (With '1' being the highest priority and '6' the lowest priority)

I will give you a few minutes to do this individually.

We will then discuss this as a group.

- Could you let me know why you've placed \*\* in the first position?
- Could you let me know why you've placed \*\* in the last position?

Potential prompts

- are any of the groups clearly in more need than the other?
- Do you see some groups as more genuinely deserving? Why?
- Is it hard or easy to differentiate between all /some/ any of the groups? Why?
- Is there any key information you feel you'd like to know to help come to a decision?

- *Is age / health / current wealth / employment history important? Should any conditions be attached?*
- *What types of help should be provided by the Welfare state and/ or the government in this scenario? Why?*

#### **Part 4: Covid-19**

1. *Do you remember seeing/hearing anything in the news about welfare during the pandemic? What were the main issues you were aware of with welfare benefits at that time?*
2. *Did you hear about the £20 increase in UC? Do you think this was a good idea? Why?*
3. *In July 2021 the Gov announced that this wouldn't be extended, and it was removed in October that year. What did you think about that decision? Why?*

Information to provide: "In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020 the Government announced an uplift to universal credit and working tax credits worth £20 a week. Initially planned to last for a year, the policy was extended by six months in the March 2021 budget. In July 2021, the Government confirmed that it would not be extended further"

\*Overall, the total number of people on Universal Credit in Great Britain surged from 3 million in March to 5.2 million in May 2020

#### **Potential further questions:**

4. *A large number of people went on to UC during COVID because they lost their jobs. Do you think those should have been treated differently - in terms of how they were prioritised - to those already on UC at the time?*
5. *What do you think were the main differences (if any) between people claiming UC before Covid-19 and people claiming UC during Covid-19?*
6. *On average, were people claiming UC before Covid-19 more or less or deserving than people claiming UC during Covid-19? Or the same? Why?*
7. *Did Covid change the way you think about the welfare state at all? In what ways?*
8. *Do you think any changes are needed to benefits, or the welfare system in light of the Covid experience?*

#### **Part 5: Wrap up**

Thank you all for your time, this has been very useful.

Are there any final comments or questions?

If you have any questions about the research over the coming weeks, please feel free to contact me using the details on the email I sent you.

I will now email a link to each of you for the £10 voucher.

## Appendix 5: coding frame

Overarching theme	Sub-Category	Code
Increased awareness of reality of welfare state	<p>Sympathy for those relying on the welfare state during Covid-19</p> <p>Failings of welfare state to provide for most vulnerable during Covid-19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing vulnerable people through Media / on social media</li> <li>• Awareness of use of food banks</li> <li>• Gap between rich and poor</li> <li>• Exposed cracks in system</li> <li>• Awareness of statutory sick pay</li> <li>• Level of awareness of temporary uplift to Universal Credit (UC) and removal</li> <li>• Expression it was the wrong decision</li> <li>• Lack of understanding from government</li> <li>• Willing to pay towards welfare state</li> <li>• Money suddenly available, but went to wrong place</li> <li>• Unfairness in the way help was distributed and money spent</li> <li>• PPE, Bounce back loans</li> <li>• Distrust in way public money spent</li> <li>• Feeling that money was wasted through Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and bounce back loans.</li> </ul>
Deservingness and Covid-exceptionalism	<p>CARIN criteria referred to</p> <p>Universal dimension of support / priority should go to...</p> <p>Covid-exceptionalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control (blame)</li> <li>• Need (means testing)</li> <li>• Reciprocity</li> <li>• Feelings towards ranking deservingness</li> <li>• Sick</li> <li>• Elderly</li> <li>• Those with children</li> <li>• Identifying differences between claimants</li> <li>• No differentiation between claimants</li> <li>• Less stigma for Covid-19 claimants</li> </ul>

	Personal experience during Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumed deservingness for most vulnerable during this time vs discussions of control &amp; need outside of Covid-19 context</li> <li>• Feeling lucky not to need have needed help</li> <li>• Losing job during pandemic</li> </ul>
Post Covid-19: Need for ongoing support for the most vulnerable		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other factors impacting the economy</li> <li>• Ongoing cost of living crisis</li> <li>• Already softening attitudes: i.e. the floor effect</li> <li>• Increased solidarity in context, of most vulnerable</li> <li>• Willing to fund necessarily payments for the most vulnerable</li> </ul>