Exploring Digital Transformations of Community, Culture and Welfare in Austere Times: the Case of Leeds

Communities and Culture Network+ Interim Report

Pilot study on Welfare and Austerity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our pilot project's central focus is on **the variegated impact and implications for culture and community of a *digitally transformed UK welfare system*** for three specific communities of interest – public administrators of welfare support, frontline welfare law advisors and those receiving or needing welfare support.

The empirical research focuses on Leeds Local Authority District and is examining data from 2008 to the present. We are working in partnership with a small **Advisory Team** comprised of members from Leeds City Council, Leeds Citizens Advice Bureau, and Leeds ACTS!. The project is analysing three local digital data sets that offer potential insights into the transformations being unleashed by austerity, welfare reform and digitalisation: data about all housing benefit claimants in Leeds; data about social housing tenants in Leeds affected by the so-called 'bedroom tax'; and data about clients of Advice Leeds services.

This interim report highlights the work we have undertaken since 1 April 2014. This report is structured as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of the research project and its key questions; Section 2 explains the nature of the collaboration and our research partners; Section 3 details the data we are collecting and analyzing; Section 4 discusses the interim findings of our three research streams; and Section 5 explains what dissemination has already undertaken and is planned for the future.

1. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Our pilot project's central focus is on **the variegated impact and implications for culture and community of a *digitally transformed UK welfare system* for three specific communities of interest at the local urban scale of Leeds – public administrators of welfare support, frontline welfare advisors and those receiving or needing welfare support**.

The importance and timeliness of this pilot study relates to the current UK context of austerity-driven spending cuts and reforms to public services, voluntary bodies and welfare provision. A new welfare system is being rolled out, headed by Universal Credit (UC), which merges 6 means-tested benefits into a single monthly payment paid in arrears. UC is also subject to various caps, sanctions and incentives designed, according to the government, to 'make work pay' while reserving welfare benefits for only those 'in the greatest need'. Claimants are to be made responsible for managing their own finances, thereby, it is claimed, saving public money, promoting self-reliance and reducing poverty in the process (DWP, 2013). Central to these 'smart-state' claims – and to our project – is UC's *technological* make-up. The government's original intention was for UC to be 'digital by default', with a target of 80% of claimants making and managing their benefit claims online by 2017.

While evidence grows about the financial and legal impacts of welfare changes (e.g. cuts to housing benefit, fitness-to-work tests, the benefit cap), the **cultural and community implications** of this new welfare system and its digital character are far less well evidenced and understood. Our pilot project aims to address this research gap.

We are guided by the following research questions:

- *How will different communities within the welfare claimant population (ethnicity, gender, class, neighbourhood, disability, age) be affected by benefit changes?*

- *How is the local public administration of welfare benefits restructuring and what role is digital technology playing?*

- *How will advice services organisationally cope with a digitalised system?*

- *How are the reforms going to affect everyday relationships between claimants and welfare services?*

- *How will the practice of welfare advisors be affected?*

- *Are there current or potential uses for digital technology that will positively assist either practitioners or claimants?*

- *What value is data collection and analysis going to be in addressing the practical issues generated by welfare reform?*

2. PARTNERSHIP

We are working in partnership Steve Carey, Chief Officer for Welfare and Benefits at Leeds City Council; Dianne Lyons, Chief Executive of Leeds Citizens Advice Bureau; and, Professor Gary Dymski, Vice-Chair of Leeds ACTS!, a partnership-building organisation for developing academic collaboration with public and third sector organisations in Leeds. This builds on existing collaborations between the University of Leeds' School of Geography and both Leeds City Council (LCC) and Leeds CAB.

We have been working with LCC's Welfare and Benefits department since March 2011 to analyse the spatial implications of welfare reform to the city of Leeds. This involves using geo-computational techniques on official data sets to track the household circumstances (e.g. income, size, benefits claimed), tenure and residential location of approximately 90,000 welfare claimants in Leeds.

We have also been working with Leeds CAB and other Advice Leeds organisations since October 2012 to assist the sector as it undergoes organisational change as a result of increased and complexifying client demand, wider funding cuts and the onset of digitalisation. This collaboration was initially supported by a Talisman User Fellowship award (2012-2013), funded by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, designed to enable non-academic users to benefit from training and support in geospatial analysis. It has received additional support from three placements projects with Geography undergraduate students.

3. DATA AND DIGITAL METHODS

We have negotiated access to three local data sets that offer potential insights into the transformations being unleashed by austerity, welfare reform and digitalisation:

- **Official data about all Housing Benefit claimants in Leeds.** Leeds City Council holds data relating to all cases where a claim for Council Tax Benefit/Support and/or Housing Benefit has been submitted. Each month a computerised report is run which includes information about all claims submitted. This report is referred to as the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE). These monthly data extracts each contain information on approximately 90,000 claimants. We have access to SHBE extracts dating back to 2008 and going forward on an ongoing basis. The data contain over 300 fields of anonymised personal information with attributes including; income, benefits claimed, household size and characteristics, and place of residence

- **Leeds Households affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria reform**. Leeds City Council also produces its own *ad hoc* data sets for the purpose of housing and benefit administration. One such data set contains anonymised records of all households in Leeds who were deemed eligible for a reduction in their weekly housing benefit payments following the April 2013 introduction of new rules covering benefit payments to those classified as under-occupying their social rented homes. Each month the number of households varies, but data about approximately 10,000 households has been collected for this purpose. The data contain just 10 fields of information, including:

number of bedrooms required, number of bedrooms in the property, and the age and gender of any dependent children.

- **Advice Leeds Client Data.** We are focusing on data provided by 6 organisations in the Advice Leeds partnership dealing predominantly with welfare issues and debt advice. These data were originally collected for reporting to service funders. Collectively they are useful for developing a picture of overall demand and supply of advice. The data contain residential addresses (and some individual demographic characteristics) of those seeking advice; and details of which services were accessed, how and where. Each data set varies in terms of type and precision of data held. There is data for approximately 20,000 households.

Following the collection of this data, we have worked as follows.

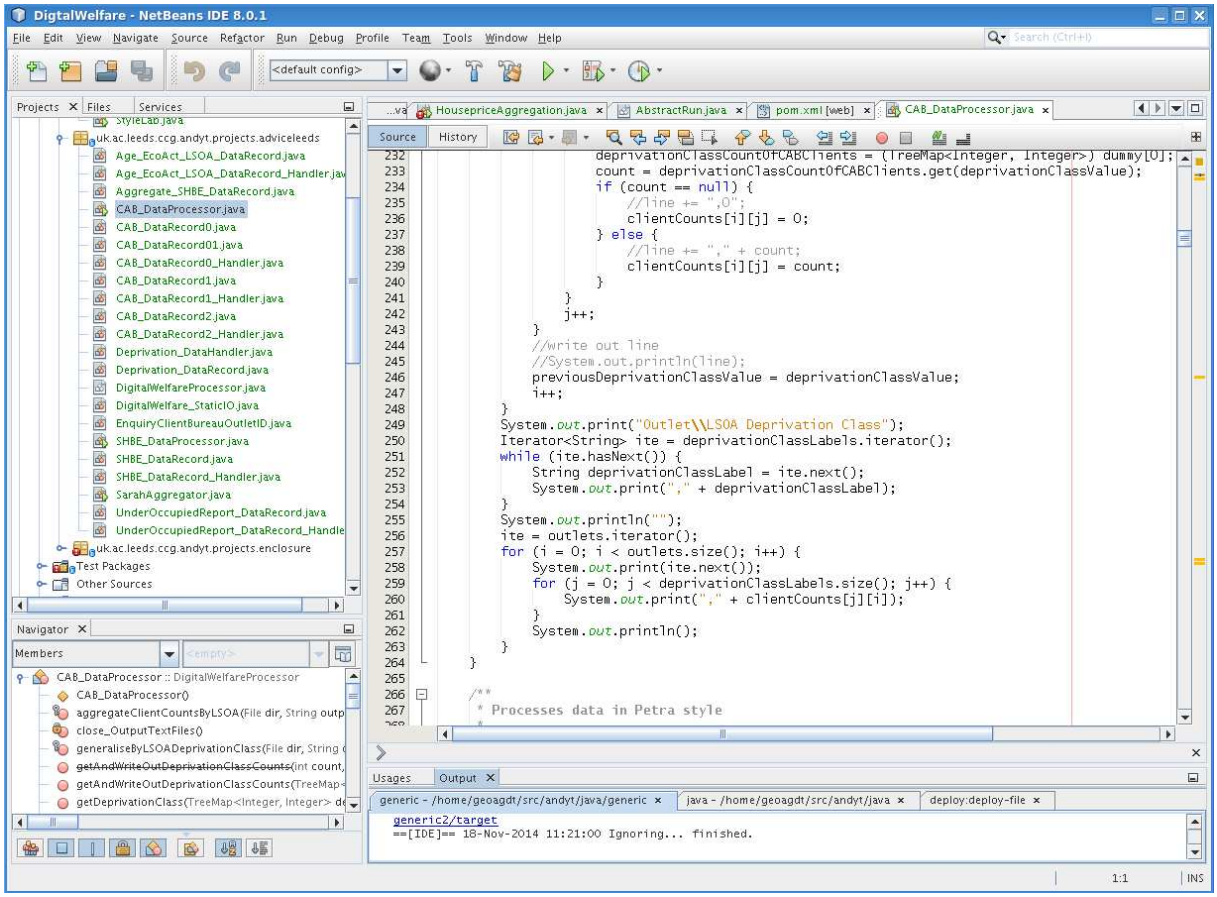
- We organised the SHBE and Under-occupancy data into different record types, linked these records as appropriate, then interrogated and summarized in various ways. We used Office for National Statistics Postcode Directory (ONSPD) look up data to check claimants' postcodes were accurate and then link to census geography. This allowed tables and geographical maps to be produced showing the number of claimants for census areas. Further summaries were made based on classifications of census areas such as those based on deprivation measures. As the SHBE data are based on monthly extracts, this allows for changes over time to be explored. The production of all the data visualisations was done programmatically so that the process can be highly automated. This automation makes it relatively easy to reproduce the visualisations from source and

extend the analysis. The programs were also developed with the idea of scaling up the analysis to nation-wide studies.

- The Advice Leeds client data format varied more from one organization to another and over time. In general the data that has been collected and made available more recently is more detailed, containing more variables. The Advice Leeds data was less complete than the SHBE data and more work was involved in cleaning the data and dealing with partial postcode information. Various generalisations and visualisations of the data were produced and in a similar way to the work done with the SHBE data.

All the programs used for processing the data have been developed in the Java language and all the source code is open source and available on the Web. Development work has been done using an open source Integrated Development Environment called Netbeans. A screen shot of the IDE interface with the project loaded showing some of the underlying source code is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Screen shot of the interface used in developing the data analysis source code



We intended to critically analyse the computerized analytical methods used. Possible critical issues that may arise include: (i) the mis-match between official data held about households' formal economic situations and their real-life situations; (ii) a lack of consistency and comparability of data across different advice service providers; (iii) variations in the quality and detail of the data over time; and (iv) the general weaknesses of quantitative data for generating critical insights into what are often phenomenological questions.

We are also collecting new qualitative data through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation with respondents from all three of our stakeholder groups.

4. INTERIM FINDNGS

Our project is organized into three specific work packages (WP). The first two WPs focus primarily on the *spatial implications* of welfare reform for welfare claimants and the welfare advice service and use geocomputational methods to analyse **existing digitised data sets**. The third WP focuses on the cultural, community and experiential implications of a digitally transformed welfare system and draw on a range of qualitative methods to collect and analyse **new ethnographic data**.

4.1. WP1 - Mapping welfare cuts for individual households and communities

This work stream is currently exploring the before-and-after effects of austerity and welfare changes on the Leeds claimant population by tracking the formal transformations of individual households' economic circumstances (income levels, benefit take-up, economic activity), household composition, residential locations, house size and tenure type as recorded in the official claimant data set, the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE), and other data held by Leeds City Council. Results will be mapped geographically, analysed by ethnicity, gender, class, neighbourhood, disability, and age, and compared with Census and other statistical data on unemployment, deprivation, ethnicity, educational attainment and health.

Following a formal data-sharing agreement signed off in January 2014, we have been receiving SHBE and under-occupancy data on a regular basis. The data was initially checked and cleaned before being loaded into a purpose-built computer program designed to run

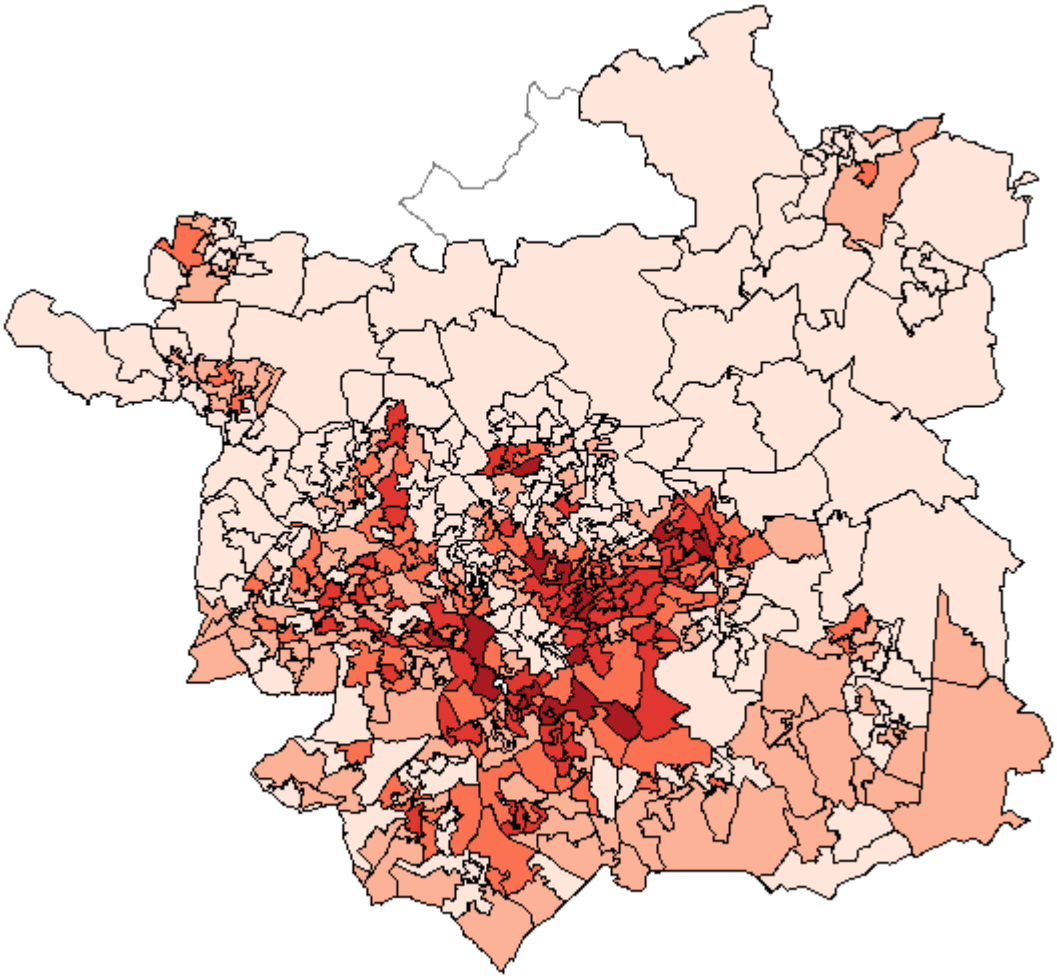
complex data analytics for the purpose of automation. A lot of unexpected time was spent resolving errors in this process. We have since been steadily working through a large number of queries designed to comprehensively analyse the data. These include:

- Identifying unique claimants and tracking their status over time e.g. when did they first appear on the data sets, are they still on or have they left, what benefits are they claiming and any changes of circumstances that can be detected;
- Identify claimants whose home postcodes have remained the same or have changed since 2008;
- Identify claimants whose tenure has changed (e.g. from social to private tenancy or vice versa) since 2008;
- Identify potential impacts of welfare reforms on individual claimants since such policies were introduced from 2010 and any correlations between welfare reforms and postcode and tenure changes.

This work is taking longer than first anticipated due to the complex and time-consuming nature of data analysis, but we have generated some initial findings. First, we have identified the geography of all housing and council tax benefit claimants in Leeds, and produced a map that shows the proportion of claimants (April 2012) against the total population (Census 2011) of each lower super output area. This shows that welfare claimants in Leeds cluster in the inner and outer urban areas of the city – covering Little London, Woodhouse, Holbeck, Hunslet, Beeston, Armley, Wortley, Headingley, Kirkstall, Chapeltown, Harehills, Richmond Hill, Burmantofts, Seacroft, Whinmoor, Middleton and Bramley – with a noticeable central urban corridor of little-to-no claimants running from the city centre northwards and out into

the wealthier areas of the north. We are currently working on analysing how this map has changed over a longer time-frame and identifying areas where benefit claiming is significantly increasing and decreasing.

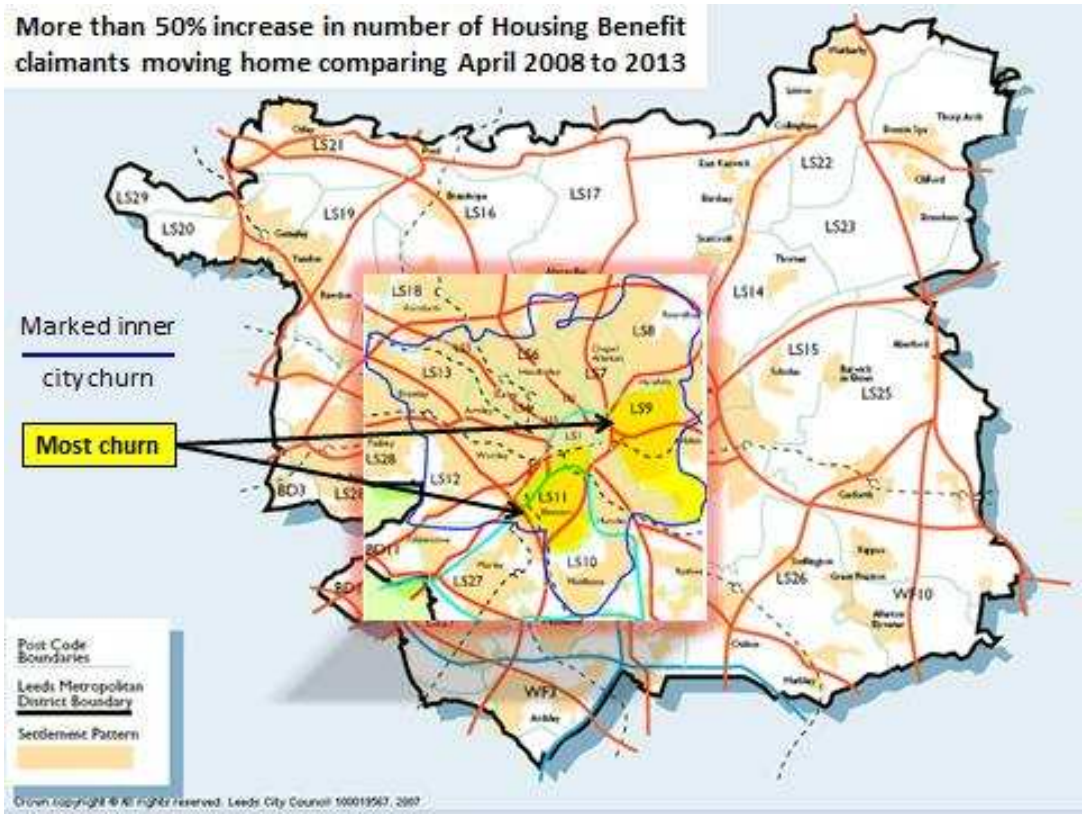
Figure 2 – Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) Location of Leeds Housing and Council Tax Benefit Claimants as at April 2012 as a proportion of LSOA population in 2011 Census



A second finding concerned tenancy instability (see Figure 3). We compared the rate of claimant home moves for the year beginning April 2008 to March 2009, against the year beginning April 2012 to March 2013. We found that there had been more than a 50%

increase in the number of housing benefit claimants moving home during 2012-13 compared to 2008-2009. This suggests that tenancy instability has increased and that the greatest degree of this 'churn' was taking place in the established private rental markets of Harehills and Beeston. However, as the number of claimants has also increased significantly from approximately 55,500 to more than 71,000 between April 2008 and March 2013, this creates a greater statistical risk of instability. We are now working to identify if there are any patterns in tenancy instability over different time periods and geographies of the city, and what factors within claimants' profiles might explain home moves.

Figure 3 – Housing Benefit claimants' postcode churn 2008 to 2013 compared



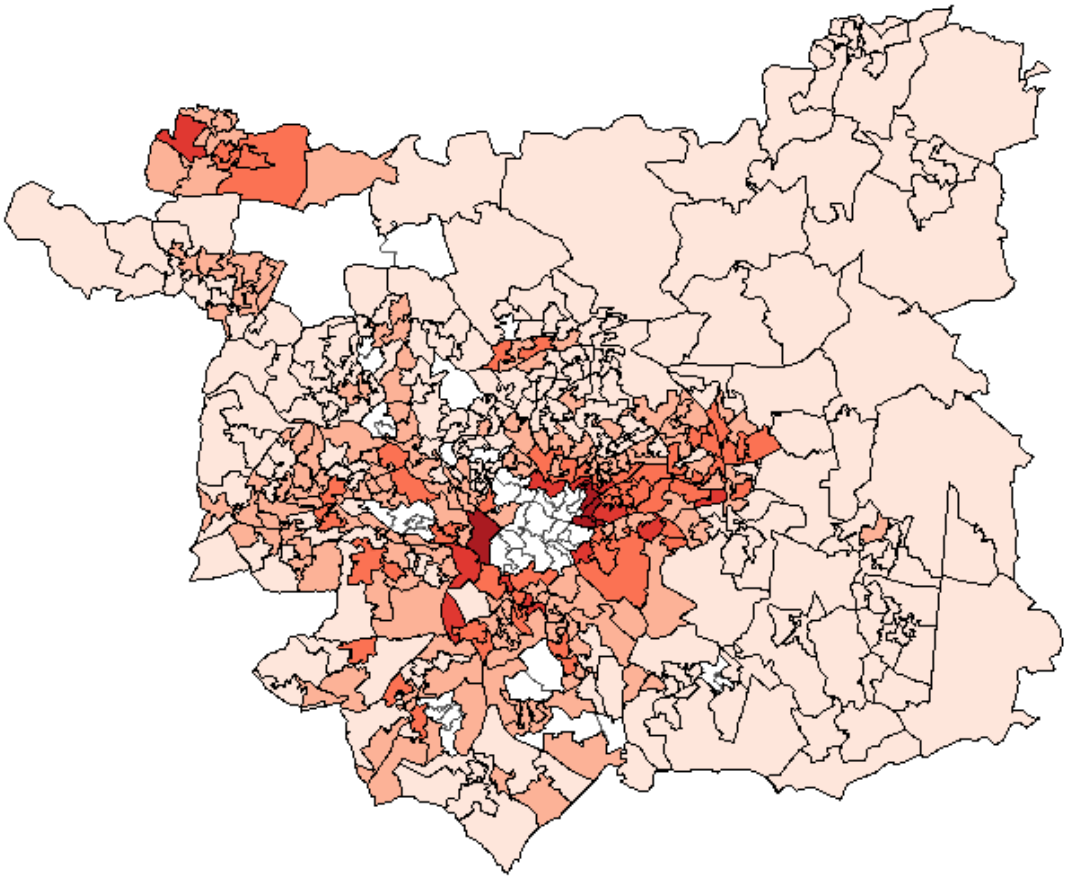
4.2. WP2 - Changing geographies of welfare advice services

This is exploring how welfare advice services might have to organisationally change in the face of the general impacts of austerity policies, a new digitalised welfare system and a digitally excluded claimant population. It examines the existing spatial distribution of face-to-face welfare advice services in Leeds and the changing nature of demand for these Advice services over the past 3 years using advice service client data. The existing city-wide geodemographics of welfare claiming, developed in WP1, will be compared to the existing geodemographic distribution of advice service provision and demand, and to existing data on internet use and literacy in Leeds. Results will be mapped geographically.

Although formal data-sharing agreements were already signed off before this project began (in July 2013), this part of our project has proven to be the most challenging in terms of working with the data provided. A major reason is that each advice service in Leeds collects data in unique ways, often for unique purposes, and they are not immediately comparable. Another factor is that Leeds CAB is part of a national CAB service that has a national customer database system that has recently changed, complicating our data collection process. To date, we have analysed raw client data (years 2011-12 and 2012-13) provided to the School of Geography by Leeds Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) from its CASE data management system. This includes advice centres located in the City Centre, Otley, Morley, Pudsey, and Crossgates. We have also drawn on additional data used by Leeds CAB for a similar analysis it performed. We identified unique clients of Leeds CAB service in each of these two years from unique client reference numbers and then used their residential

postcodes where recorded to identify the Lower Super Output Areas where they live (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Leeds City CAB Clients for LSOAs clipped to Leeds Local Authority District



Based on this geospatial analysis, we have generated some initial findings about the demographic profile of the Leeds CAB client base using the Indices of Deprivation mapped against Lower Super Output Areas:

- Leeds CAB increased the total number of unique clients it advised by 53.9% (3802 new clients) from 7051 in 2008/09, to 10,853 in 2012/13;

- Most of this growth has come from the expansion and diversification of the Leeds CAB service since 2010, most notably through its Telephone Gateway service – where clients can ring up and be assessed for the appropriate advice service they need – and the F2F Debt Advice service.
- Comparing 2008/09 to 2012/13, the entire Leeds CAB service reached the following numbers and proportions of clients by LSOA deprivation band:

Table 1: Total Unique Clients Seen by Leeds CAB by LSOA Deprivation Band by year

		Top 3%		3 to 5%		5 to 10%		10 to 20%		20 to 100%	
Year	Total Unique Clients	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
08/09	7051	839	12	434	6	1342	19	682	10	3754	53
09/10	7686	1291	17	414	5	1454	19	784	10	3743	49
11/12	9691	1125	12	725	7	1585	16	1376	14	4880	50
12/13	10853	1184	11	755	7	1731	16	1537	14	5646	52

- Comparing 2012/13 to 2008/09 for the entire Leeds CAB service, the LSOA location of its unique client base changed as follows:
    - 41.1% increase in unique clients from 3% most deprived SOAs from 839 to 1184 with an overall consistent proportion across the service (12 to 11%);
    - 74% increase in unique clients coming from the 3 to 5% most deprived SOAs from 434 to 755 with an overall consistent proportion across the service (6 to 7%);

- 29% increase in unique clients coming from the 5 to 10% most deprived SOAs from 1342 to 1731, but a small drop in the proportion across the service as a whole (19 to 16%);
- 125.4% increase in unique clients coming from the 10 to 20% most deprived SOAs from 682 to 1537 with a small increase in the proportion across the service (10 to 14%)
- 50.4% increase in unique clients coming from the 20 to 100% most deprived SOAs from 3754 to 5646 with an overall consistent proportion across the service (53 to 52%).

- Of the four years under study, 2009/10 saw a far greater number and proportion of clients from the top 3% most deprived LSOAs being seen by the Leeds CAB service. This is partly a consequence of an increase in funding for 2009 and 2010 made available by the previous Labour Government to enable such services to respond to the effects of the global financial crisis. The service had a temporary increase in financial resources that were targeted for supporting those from the most deprived areas. This is also held to explain the higher numbers of unique clients visiting the Leeds CAB in 2009/10 compared to 2012/13.

These findings have supported ongoing discussions about Advice Leeds service reorganisation. We are currently working with Leeds CAB to provide an evidence base for their consultation on this issue.

4.3. WP3 - Changing cultures and relations of welfare support and advice provision

This final work stream is exploring the various social and cultural implications that a digitalised welfare system might have for individual welfare claimants, welfare administrators and frontline advice providers using new qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation with respondents from all three stakeholder groups. This includes the potential changes in values, attitudes and behaviour that an online claiming system could generate; the implications for those not able or willing to claim online; what the devaluing face-to-face contact and social relations might mean for claimants' lives; how the values, ethos and social status of, and the social relationships between (potential) welfare claimants and welfare institutions, might be changing as a result of welfare reforms and digitisation; how digitalisation is restructuring the local public administration of welfare benefits; and how advice services might organisationally cope with a digitalised system. The bulk of the pilot interviews for this work package was undertaken in May, June, and July 2014. A small focus group of a senior welfare administrator in Leeds City Council and the Leeds CAB service manager was complemented by 13 interviews conducted with:

- 5 frontline welfare legal advisors
- 3 senior officers from the Advice Leeds network
- 1 Job Centre+ administrator (not Leeds)
- 6 service users

These interviews have produced the following three key initial findings that we illustrate through quotations from our interviewees:

4.3.1. ***Exclusion from a digital-by-default system is inevitable for particular groups of claimants who will be unable to access or cope with an online welfare-claiming system and a more general shift of public services online as a result of the interplay between client destitution, social exclusion, disability and poor mental health:***

"The nature of our client group is people who … have greater barriers in terms of… literacy, mental health issues, disability… who are going to be excluded and struggle" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 3)

"There is a big, big group of people who simply don't have the IT skills to successfully make those claims" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 2)

"I see people come in here who have… never used a computer in their lives, who are told by the Job Centre to go do job search. … People don't even know what the word "login" means, some of them" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 5)

"I suffer from migraine and they're telling me I have to use this computer, and they're messing about with programmes in the computer to start with. So I'm no sooner given advice and shown to do it this way, then I come in 2 or 3 days later and they've messed about with the programme, so the advisor doesn't even know what he's doing." (CLIENT 4)

"Up at the DSS there's women there just think we're skiving all the time. And I don't own a computer, I hate computers, and the last four years looking for work has been a nightmare, because I don't understand computers and I never will." (CLIENT 5)

4.3.2. Destitution caused by digitalisation, both from computer errors and digital exclusion, will be a reality of the new system and is already happening:

"I know that you can insist on making a claim over the phone if need be, and that's what we did. Now, I had to be fairly vociferous to do that, but if you had that young woman on her own there's no way. She would have then struggled, and perhaps would have left it, and maybe not received a benefit. And so the implications would have been that that would have put more financial pressure on her family that she was living with" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 1)

"…increasing reliance upon digital often places pressure on advisors to provide one-to-one support with using computers and can lead to clients becoming frustrated, meaning that they may walk out in anger and end up getting sanctioned "for things that they can't control" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 5).

"You can have the best IT skills in the world, but if there's an issue with the system, so that you think you've applied for a job and you've only just saved the information, the consequences are huge for you". (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 2)

4.3.4. Conditionality for receiving welfare payments – e.g. being forced to actively look for work, to accept employment opportunities and to agree to training and volunteering in return for continuing to receive social security payments – has already been introduced and will be a greater feature and possibility of a digitalised claiming system.

"*Universal Jobmatch seems to be a particular problem at the moment. It's giving a decision maker quite clear evidence, in order to penalise people, and they're not taking into account other steps that people may have to take that aren't on a computer or via a tablet. […] Rather than being used to document what they have done it seems to be used to penalise what they haven't"* (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 6)

4.3.5. The workloads of advice service providers will increase and associated organisational costs will also rise in order to help claimants to claim online, to solve problems with computerisation and to take retrospective action to protect incomes:

"*We can only deal with a certain amount of people, we can't do classroom tuition…"* (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 5)

"We don't have the space and human resources to support access to online claiming" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 3)

"Social landlords are going to have to invest in computers and digital support just to protect rental income under Universal Credit. Where is the funding for this?" (FRONTLINE ADVISOR 1)

4.3.6. The move to a digitalised online claiming system is likely to enable the future outsourcing of the system, and with it, the potential rolling up of publicly-funded advice services into such contracts as has been seen in the outsourcing of the Home Office contracts to provide accommodation for asylum seekers in the UK.

"Job Centres have also been recruiting internally for staff to "floor walk" or "hand hold". Things like "virtual signing" are also being trialled in some areas, leading some Job Centre advisors to worry that their professional roles may be phased out in preparation for completely outsourcing the service." (ADVICE CENTRE MANAGER 1)

5. DISSEMINATION SO FAR

We have so far communicated to our stakeholders in the following ways:

- A series of informal meetings with Advice Leeds and Leeds City Council to brief on progress and receive feedback;
- A formal presentation and discussion with our stakeholder Advisory Group in June 2014 at the University of Leeds;

- A briefing in July 2014 to Leeds CAB containing our geographical and deprivation analysis of the Leeds CAB client base;
- A formal presentation about the research and some initial findings to the Advice Leeds Summit on 7 November 2014 at the St George's Centre, Leeds;

Once our pilot research findings are sufficiently progressed, our intention is to hold **three dissemination workshops** where the outcomes will be communicated separately to a larger membership from all three stakeholder groups. These engagement events will be supplemented by a series of **smaller informal briefings** targeted at specific user communities and an accessible **public report.**

We are currently building a basic **project website** that will host a data **blog,** some **interactive digital maps** of welfare impacts on different communities in Leeds and a **Linked Data resource** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linked_data). We will also publish at least one **academic journal article** on the research findings.