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research article

Progressive for all? The experience of LGBTQ+ people in the Scottish social security system

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Since devolution in 1999 the Scottish government has worked to advance a more progressive (compared to the UK government) policy agenda across a wide range of policy areas. This included reforms to the social security system which sought to remove some of the stigmatising and punitive aspects of the UK system. In parallel to these developments, the Scottish government internationally portrayed itself as a leader in LGBTQ+ rights. Drawing on qualitative data from among the first qualitative studies to centre LGBTQ+ social security claimants across England, Wales and Scotland, this article explores the implications of reforms for LGBTQ+ claimants, examining evidence as to whether these progressive ideals have been met. Focusing on interactions with the bureaucracy (the process of applying for social security) and interactions with the bureaucrats (the face-to-face and online management of claims), we explore how changes to Scotland's social security system may have reduced anxiety and stigma and provided an improved experience. Further, we also show how the Scottish social security system has integrated greater recognition and respect into its social security system, which contrasts with the stigmatising, and increasingly anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric of the UK government and polity.

Keywords LGBTQ+ • social security • Scotland

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Research exploring income and poverty among lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer people (LGBTQ+), or other diverse gender identities and sexualities, has been limited but has challenged the myth of 'gay affluence' (Aksoy et al, 2018; Badgett et al, 2024). Analysis already explores the numbers of LGBTQ+ people claiming income support (see Deal et al, 2024; Henderson et al, 2025) and has considered the impact of austerity cuts on welfare support (Beckett, 2015). Our analysis focuses on the experience of claiming social security provision, drawing on qualitative data to explore interactions

with welfare providers (whereas other studies have used quantitative data; see [Butz and Gaynor, 2022](#)). This article, among the first qualitative studies to centre LGBTQ+ claimants in Britain, offers a unique insight into an overlooked group within studies of social security provision.

Our research focused upon England, Wales and Scotland, and this article pays particular attention to the experiences of LGBTQ+ Scottish residents. Devolution in the United Kingdom (UK) has had an uneven development since the late 1990s ([Jeffery, 2009](#); [Birrell et al, 2023](#)). Of the devolved nations, Scotland has had greater policy areas transferred from the central government to the Scottish parliament (referred to as devolved matters). The UK government has retained some policy areas (referred to as reserved matters). At the time of writing, social security sits between these two points – with elements devolved to Scotland (administered by Social Security Scotland [SSS]) and other aspects reserved by the UK government (Department for Work and Pensions [DWP]).

In focusing on the Scottish data, we consider how marginalised and stigmatised LGBTQ+ people experience efforts by the Scottish government to develop a more progressive, humane and less stigmatising social security system. The contribution of this paper therefore is to:

- (1) explore the varied experiences of LGBTQ+ claimants, resident in Scotland, as they interact with SSS- and DWP-administered social security systems, and to highlight how Scottish policies seek to put dignity into practice, though this may not yet facilitate inclusive practice towards LGBTQ+ people;
- (2) add to existing analysis of stigmatising and dehumanising policy practices and set out a series of reforms to practice ([Bolton et al, 2022](#); [Wright, 2023](#); [Patrick, 2024](#)); and
- (3) offer a foundation for further research into the intersection of inclusion, equality and social security reform, reflecting on the experiences of under-researched groups of claimants.

To achieve this, attention is given to the experience of claimants with the bureaucracy (the process of applying for social security) and interactions with the bureaucrats (the face-to-face and online management of claims) to understand whether the approach to reforms to social security policy removes discrimination of LGBTQ+ people and fosters inclusive practice. Through the data, it is possible to consider whether reforms have reduced anxiety and stigma, and provided an improved experience compared to that experienced within the reserved social security system delivered by the DWP. Our analysis considers whether greater recognition and respect, a key part of Scotland's social security system reforms, has been integrated into claimant experiences. This in turn provides potential policy lessons for consideration across the wider UK social security system (and beyond). In this case-study approach, we first set out the post-2016 Scottish social security context and relevant conceptual lenses (dignity, cis-het-izanship), then outline methods, before presenting Scotland-focused findings and practice implications.

Social security and Scotland post-2016

Devolution from the central UK government to the Scottish parliament followed the successful referendum in 1997. The Scottish parliament was reestablished in 1999

with a series of devolved matters, over which the newly formed Scottish government would have direct control. The UK government reserved other matters, retaining policy control. Social security provision was one such reserved matter, and the UK government reforms to the system impacted across Britain. Gradually, as devolution and Scottish independence debates continued post-devolution, greater powers were granted to the Scottish parliament which also expanded the policy areas which fell under its remit.

Two later developments within this ongoing process of devolution have been the Scotland Act 2016 (transfer of further powers to the Scottish government) and the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 (providing the legal framework for operating social security in devolved Scotland). The 2018 Act recognises social security as a human right and places the dignity of individuals at its heart (sections 1[b], 1[d]). Combined, these acts have allowed the Scottish government to top-up existing benefits, to create devolved versions of UK-wide benefits and provided some scope for creating new benefits, while the central government continues to control some social security provision (Table 1 provides a broad overview of which government retains responsibility for which benefits).

Securing new powers within the area of social security, the Scottish government has given considerable attention to the role of dignity in framing changes to the social security system in Scotland (Patrick and Simpson, 2020). The Scottish government sought to foreground dignity as a key principle for the new SSS. Using consultation

Table 1: Devolved and reserved social security powers

Scottish government responsibility	Westminster government responsibility
Disability and ill health Adult Disability Payment Child Disability Payment Pension Age Disability Payment Severe Disability Payment Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	Working-age benefits Universal Credit Jobseekers Allowance Employment and Support Allowance Income Support Working Tax Credit Child Tax Credit
Carer support Carer's Allowance Supplement Young Carer Grant Carer Support Payment	Pensions and older people State Pension Pension Credit
Family and child benefits Best Start Grant Best Start Foods	Family and maternity Child Benefit Maternity Allowance
Heating and funeral support Winter Heating Payment Child Winter Heating Assistance Funeral Support Payment	Bereavement benefits Bereavement Support Payment Widowed Parent's Allowance
Employment and transition Job Start Payment	
Housing Discretionary Housing Payment Some administrative powers over Universal Credit (e.g. payment frequency and split payments)	

Source: Adapted from <https://www.gov.scot/publications/responsibility-for-benefits-overview/>.

and extensive engagement with service-user panels, the SSS shifted to focus on human rights in establishing principles against which to design and monitor devolved social security provision. This not only recognised social security as a human right that can support the attainment of other rights (section 1[b] of the 2018 Act reads: ‘social security is itself a human right and essential to the realisation of other human rights’) but also placed dignity of individuals at the heart of the Scottish social security system (section 1[d] of the 2018 Act, reads ‘respect for the dignity of individuals is to be at the heart of the Scottish social security system’) as a foundation for practice and a guide for future reforms (section 1[g][ii] of the 2018 Act, which seeks to ‘advance equality and non-discrimination’) (O’Cinneide, 2019).

It should be noted that, unlike the DWP, SSS has begun publicly publishing equality, diversity and inclusivity statistics on claimants. This shows that a disproportionate number of claimants are LGBTQ+ when compared to proportions recorded at the Scottish census in 2022. Of the 89 per cent of claimants who shared sexual identity data with SSS, six per cent identify as non-heterosexual, compared to 3.5 per cent of the Scottish population, and one per cent of claimants reveal a trans identity, again slightly more than that recorded at the census¹ (Social Security Scotland, 2024). Drawing on findings from our research into LGBTQ+ experiences of social security in Britain, we can consider how queer people currently experience provision in Scotland and how this can inform future policy revisions.

Cishet-izenship, equality and social security

Within social policy, there has been a critical tradition for challenging how welfare systems aim not only to support the ‘right sort’ of people (Weeks, 1989) but also the gendered assumptions regarding the roles different citizens will play (Lister, 1997); and the ongoing discriminatory treatment towards non-white citizens (Williams, 1989; Meer, 2020). In the 80 years since many of the Beveridge reforms were put into practice in the UK, there has been turbulent progress on an array of rights and recognition of diversity in society around issues of gender, race/ethnicity, disability, sexuality and more; as well as the backlash and critique of this progress, especially in relation to race/ethnicity and LGBTQ+ rights in the last few years (Williams, 1992; 2021; Bagilhole, 2009; Meer, 2020). Feminist critique has highlighted social security provision as being based upon a male breadwinner model assumption. Challenges to this ultimately triggered a gradual series of reforms to remove some gendered exclusions (e.g. couple recognition and survivor benefits).

However, queer history is more turbulent. Illegality, moral disdain and overt discrimination pattern the historic experience of LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ lives largely existed outside the accepted life-course norms for which the welfare state was developed. Inclusion, however, could be found where the male breadwinner model could be emulated. Some trans men were initially awarded male national insurance cards by the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance, emphasising the male breadwinner model. Trans men were seen as being able to contribute more to the system and would retire later: thus offering financial benefits to the national insurance system. It was only when the General Register Office challenged this classification, insisting that birth certificates were the ‘true’ record of sex, that this practice started to change (Kane-Galbraith, 2024). Despite this brief acceptance of trans men, many administrative rules and processes presume heterosexual, cisgender life courses.

This explains why later policy shifts did not automatically deliver inclusive practice for LGBTQ+ claimants.

Access to and engagement with social security provision has often been considered in relation to citizenship rights and the more fundamental framing of citizenship *per se* (see [Patrick and Wright, forthcoming](#)). Within the UK (and in many, if not all, industrialised nations), the development of welfare systems has embedded a set of heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions regarding who constitutes a citizen, which have paid little attention to queer lives. This has led to the suggestion of *cishet-izenship* ([Gregory and Matthews, 2022](#)), which underscores how implicit normative assumptions underpin universal citizenship (following the tradition of [Lister, 1997](#); [Richardson, 2000](#); [Rex, 2007](#)). Specifically, [Gregory and Matthews \(2022\)](#) argue that heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions about lifestyles and life course not only infuse the concept of citizenship but, in turn, shape the design and implementation of welfare provisions. For example:

- The two-child limit is tied to biological sequencing (first child, second child, etc.), which does not map neatly onto LGBTQ+ families.
- Proof of legal marriage is often required to access survivors benefits.
- Priority need housing support criteria in England is based on a nuclear family structure – which can exclude single-person and chosen-family households prominent among LGBTQ+ people.
- Means-testing for benefits such as Universal Credit investigates relationship status and assumes heteronormative households.
- National Health Service IT systems historically used binary markers; for example, a trans man registered as male would be removed from cervical cancer screening services.
- Trans women can be excluded from ‘female-only spaces’, which can impact a range of welfare support systems such as emergency accommodation.

Consequently, *cishet-izenship*² lacks explicit recognition of the diversity of people’s lives, in this case non-heterosexual and non-cisgender (or trans) identities.

Similar experiences of changes to access and assessment of social security for LGBTQ+ partnerships/marriage can be seen across most European countries as illustrated in [Table 2](#). This shows where legal recognition, either for partnerships and/or marriage (both, where the former preceded the latter) occurred within various European nations (year introduced) and when joint claims from same-sex partners were expected. Additionally, [Table 2](#) indicates variation by partial parity and full parity. Partial parity occurs where some, but not all social security provisions are provided for same-sex couples. For example, in Switzerland changes in 2007 granted inheritance tax rights to same-sex partners but not full pension or survivor benefits, which were not granted until marriage equality was achieved in 2022. While the specifics of each European nation’s social security system will vary, European and UK equalities frameworks provide a legal backdrop to the Scottish debates and policies related to promoting equality.

It is within this context that aspects of the social security system were devolved to the Scottish government through the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. This Act established several *Scottish principles* to guide reforms to devolved parts of the social security system. These included recognising social security as a human right, but

Table 2: Overview of European equal partnership recognition and joint social security claims timeline

Country	Legal recognition type	Year introduced	Joint claims expected
Netherlands	Marriage	2001	2001
Belgium	Marriage	2003	2003
Spain	Marriage	2005	2005
UK	Civil partnership/marriage	2005/2014	2005
France	PACS/marriage	1999/2013	1999 (limited), 2013 (full parity)
Germany	Registered partnership/marriage	2001/2017	2001 (partial), 2017 (full parity)
Ireland	Civil partnership/marriage	2011/2015	2011
Austria	Registered partnership/marriage	2010/2019	2010
Sweden	Registered partnership/marriage	1995/2009	1995 (partial), 2009 (full parity)
Norway	Registered partnership/marriage	1993/2009	1993 (partial), 2009 (full parity)
Finland	Registered partnership/marriage	2002/2017	2002 (partial), 2017 (full parity)
Portugal	Marriage	2010	2010
Italy	Civil Union	2016	2016
Czech Republic	Registered partnership	2006	2006 (limited rights)
Hungary	Registered partnership	2009	2009
Slovenia	Marriage	2022	2022
Switzerland	Registered partnership/marriage	2007/2022	2007 (partial), 2022 (full parity)
Estonia	Marriage	2024	2024
Greece	Civil union/marriage	2015/2024	2015 (partial), 2024 (full parity)
Croatia	Life partnership	2014	2014
Cyprus	Civil union	2015	2015
Latvia	Civil union	2024	2024
Lithuania	Civil union (pending)	2025 (planned)	2025 (expected)

also as an essential means of securing other human rights; respect for the dignity of individuals and efforts to continually improve the Scottish social security system in ways which advance equality and non-discrimination. These principles informed the development of the Social Security Charter which set out 51 expectations which uphold the principles of the Act, but also facilitate measures of progress by Social Security Scotland. The Charter report ([Scottish Commission on Social Security, 2025](#)) notes that while the Charter has not featured prominently in the minds of claimants, it has provided the foundations for a more inclusive approach with claimants reporting positive experiences engaging with the system. This potential contrasts with the ‘violent proletarianization’ of the UK social security system, referring to the ways in which austerity policies and social security reforms use socio-economic inequality and punitive welfare measures to coerce people into low-paid labour, producing harms that are known, avoidable, and structurally embedded ([Grover, 2019](#)).

This approach reflects the broader ‘Scottish brand’ of social justice, seeking to establish qualitative differences with the UK government ([Simpson et al, 2019](#)). Devolution of some aspects of social security administration may allow for the

advancement of the principles within the Act, but reserved aspects remain within the purview of the UK government which may limit the potential realisation of the Act's principles, especially in relation to the reduction of poverty (Simpson et al, 2019). Yet, in placing dignity at the centre of policy, social security should ensure that claimants are protected from inhuman and degrading treatment. Dignity and social security processes have been given considerable attention in welfare debates (Chan and Bowpitt, 2005; Machin, 2020). Such analysis can be linked to concepts of social justice, which draw together material redistribution with the need for recognition, referring to cultural status and social standing (Fraser, 2009). McCrudden (2008) suggests such protections align with articles 3 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR): protection from inhuman or degrading treatment and living conditions, the ability to access one's essential needs, individual autonomy and protection of cultural identity. Simpson et al (2019) relate these debates to minimum levels of income, and such an account could be extended to LGBTQ+ identities. The concept of dignity has underpinned legal reforms which have granted greater rights to LGBTQ+ people.

It could be assumed that progress within legal and policy spaces has advanced recognition of LGBTQ+ people, reducing and potentially removing discrimination; using policy to pursue social justice via legal and social change to create a context of equality. Studies of LGBTQ+ lives have drawn on the concept of dignity to illustrate how it can be both a source of empowerment to pursue liberation but also a constraint which requires conformity and suppresses queer difference (Engel and Lyle, 2021). Finck (2016) argues that human dignity acts as an effective *justificatory tool* because its conceptual flexibility and intuitive moral appeal allow courts and legislatures to rely on it when expanding rights – especially in cases where traditional legal doctrines (such as equality) are harder to apply directly. Dignity is frequently used even though it lacks a fixed legal meaning. Its function is not to supply a precise rule, but to justify outcomes, especially pro-gay rights outcomes such as marriage equality.

Pursuing change, the Scottish Charter principles have been operationalised through service standards, staff training and report metrics within SSS. SSS has designed recruitment processes to select staff who align with principles of dignity, fairness, and respect. At delivery level, allowing multiple forms of application, ensuring confirmation of receipt of application and clarity over the next steps, and allowing collaborative working between claimant and advisor to secure evidence (including the ability to request advisors secure evidence directly from healthcare providers) are practices said to reflect the core principles of SSS (Scottish Government, 2024). This has been accompanied by some shift in government discourse (Patrick and Wright, 2024). The Scottish government set up evaluations that use focus groups and claimant surveys. Analysis suggests that organisational culture is shifting, but there is concern about 'the implementation of the Charter commitments and a mis-match between measures in the framework and how Social Security Scotland delivers in practice' (Scottish Government, 2024: 4). Our analysis adds to such insights by suggesting that policy and legal changes do not necessarily address discrimination at the street-level of social security delivery.

LGBTQ+ lives: welfare, law and Scotland – a short history

Within its recent history, Scotland has demonstrated a commitment to advancing LGBTQ+ rights through various legal and policy reforms. Prior to devolution,

Scotland had a long history of administrative independence from the central UK government. The Acts of Union of 1707, for example, provided Scotland with administrative control over its legal system, which primarily shaped the experience of gay men. As with many nations, making homosexuality among men illegal was the focus of early criminal laws and other interventions have focused on gay men, rather than lesbians; primarily due to lawmakers' fears that a focus on homosexuality among women would encourage such behaviours. Homosexuality (among men) remained illegal in Scotland until 1980. A broadly more socially conservative attitude within Scotland resulted in this late change (MacNicol, 2017), whereas England and Wales saw partial legalisation of same-sex acts between consenting men, aged over 21, in private through the Sexual Offences Act 1967. However, from the 1980s the pace of reform in Scotland started to pick up: an early indication of a concern for dignity and human rights which would later inform social security reform.

Importantly, one of the earliest legislative measures by the new Scottish parliament after it was reconvened in 1999 was the repeal of section 2(a) of the Local Government Act (known as section 28 in England and Wales), in 2000 (three years before England and Wales). Section 28, introduced by the Conservative government, prohibited local authorities from 'promoting' non-traditional families – essentially preventing any discussion of LGBTQ+ people, their lives and their relationships – and has been heavily criticised for being homophobic, regressive legislation. Progress continued apace. The age of consent was equalised to 16 in 2001 (having previously been reduced to 18 in 1994), passing without challenge, while the UK government had to use rarely utilised powers embedded in the Parliament Act 1949 to push the legislation through and override the objections of the second chamber (the House of Lords).

This early start in promoting LGBTQ+ rights within Scottish policy and law continued across the subsequent years of devolution. Other key pieces of progressive legislation to support LGBTQ+ people in Scotland were products of legislation passed by the UK government and promulgated into Scottish legislation through legislative consent motions (a motion laid down in the Scottish parliament where Scottish ministers recommend that UK law be incorporated into Scottish law unless there are objections). Key among these were: equalisation of the age of consent for men-who-have-sex-with-men in 2001; the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Additionally, the Scottish government started, and continues to provide core funding to LGBTQ+ charities and support organisations, such as the umbrella body the Equality Network, and LGBT Youth Scotland. Further reforms in the Scottish context have seen:

- same-sex couples gain adoption and fostering rights (2009);
- a Hate Crimes Bill introduced in the Scottish parliament which explicitly included sexual orientation and gender identity;
- an update in 2013 to criminal law in Scotland to remove the last offence that criminalised men-who-have-sex-with-men (buggery) from the statute book;
- legalisation of same-gender marriage (2014); and
- in perhaps one of the most unique and historic moves by the Scottish parliament, the Historical Sexual Offences (Pardons and Disregards) Act

2018 provided formal pardons to men, living and dead, convicted of having consensual sex with other men before it was decriminalised.

While the Scottish government has been a key player in driving forward this equalities agenda, it has found itself at the epicentre of policy and legal debate which has stoked the ‘culture war’ against trans people across the UK.

In 2021, the Scottish government introduced reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 to simplify legal gender change. Although the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill passed with strong support, the UK government blocked it using section 35 of the Scotland Act – an unprecedented intervention. This reflected both ongoing national disputes over trans rights and tensions regarding devolved and reserved powers, particularly as the Equality Act 2010 is reserved to Westminster. Scotland subsequently became a key site for anti-trans narratives. Some academic critics claimed trans-inclusive policies showed inappropriate influence from activists ([Murray and Hunter Blackburn, 2019](#)), though others challenged this ([Cowan et al, 2020](#)). Even proposed census questions on gender identity faced organised opposition ([Guyan, 2022](#)). These debates culminated in a legal challenge to including trans women within the definition of women for improving representation on public boards. In 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that ‘sex’ in the Equality Act refers to biological sex in a case lost by the Scottish government.

While these developments shape the wider context for administrative decisions about names and gender markers (elements of administrative practice for delivering social security), our analysis focuses on claimant-facing processes.

In becoming a focal point for trans rights debates in the UK, the recent Scottish experience has also fed into similar debates across the globe. Many Western nations have found themselves within a ‘culture war’, so named because it describes deeply polarised public debates over social and moral issues – often framed as clashes between traditional values and progressive change ([Cammaerts, 2022](#); [Phelan, 2025](#)). These debates are not found in the UK alone but occur within the US and many European countries. A claim that trans people’s rights somehow risk women’s rights and protections in society ([Pearce et al, 2020](#)) and need to be curtailed has been reinforced by the Supreme Court decision. Consequently, reforms to improve the welfare of trans people are robustly opposed ([Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan, 2022](#)) and policy and lawmakers are increasingly relying on claimed biological distinctions between men and women as the basis of policy and law ([Butler, 2025](#)). Considering the tone of such debate and its influence on policy, our analysis examines how the Scottish government’s focus on dignity within security system reforms can support LGBTQ+ people, within this hostile climate.

Methodology

The research was designed as a mixed-methods project of secondary analysis of existing survey data (not reported here, see [Matthews et al, 2024](#)) and interviews with 101 people who identified as LGBTQ+ who had claimed any social security benefit within Britain since 2014, of which 14 were resident in Scotland.

The research was designed to be attuned to the spatial impacts of welfare reform across Great Britain (Beatty and Fothergill, 2018). Participant recruitment and interviews took place from January 2022 to September 2023. Recognising the challenges of recruiting a sub-section of a relatively small population – it is estimated that around 3.5 per cent of the population of Britain is LGBTQ+, and within this only a minority will be, or will have, claimed a social security benefit – an opportunistic and then purposive sampling strategy was used. Participants were recruited through social media (Twitter/X, Instagram and Facebook); mailing lists; LGBTQ+ organisations; welfare rights organisations; and snowball sampling. The call for participants was specifically targeted at trans people as they are often under-represented in broader LGBTQ+ research. Demographic data was collected not only to inform analysis but also to monitor recruitment, including ensuring that participants were from across Great Britain. Through this it was noted that the sample had very few participants from Scotland and Wales and specific efforts were made to recruit from these nations through LGBTQ+ organisations. The data thus collected allowed comparisons across Great Britain.

Interviews were informed by an agreed topic guide and supported by regular team meetings which discussed the topic guide to ensure consistency between the interviews. Most interviews took place online using MS Teams and were recorded using the native recording tool, with a small number of interviews in-person, or on the telephone. All interviews except two were one-to-one interviews, the others being interviews with couples. The time-period of the interviews is noteworthy here. Most of the interviews were carried out in 2022, a period when the UK government was increasingly openly hostile to LGBTQ+ people and was leading anti-trans campaigns as part of culture wars. It also parallels the period when the Scottish government was passing the Gender Recognition Bill and continued to seek to be a global leader in LGBTQ+ rights.

In capturing demographic data, and due to the nature of the population, participants could describe their gender and sexual identity using their own terms. Table 3 provides an overview of the demographics of the sample. Not all participants volunteered this information, but their interview data was still included in the research. Like in England (2021), much of this was disclosed during the course of the interview. Further, the categories are not necessarily exclusive, therefore totals in the table will not add up to 101. Of the 17 residing in Scotland, some had only claimed benefits from the DWP; others had claimed passported benefits (benefits automatically available due to entitlement to another benefit) from the Scottish government (the Carers Allowance Supplement) and a small number who had claimed benefits administered by SSS.

Interviews were transcribed in full. We conducted a framework-based thematic analysis. We developed an initial coding frame through several team conversations. During regular meetings, emerging themes and ideas were collated and reviewed at the start of the analysis process. Drawing on suggested practices by Harding (2018), summaries were developed for each interview, which informed the development of the thematic framework. To ensure consistency among researchers and to ensure suitability of coding, a pilot coding exercise was carried out. The result was a high level of consistency and so each member of the research team coded the sub-themes under one larger theme. Regular meetings of the research team ensured reflection and consistency in the coding. Key high-level themes identified were focused on: starting a benefit claim and attitudes to the social security system; interactions with

the bureaucracy of social security; and interactions with bureaucrats. Our analysis did not explicitly focus on place-based differences but did have awareness of social security reforms in Scotland and how these might influence experiences of social security administration and claiming among participants. As such, for this article, we specifically consider the narratives of our 17 participants living in Scotland, with an occasional inclusion of England/Wales data where it highlights a difference experienced by Scottish residents (although comparative, place-based analysis was not part of our initial analysis).

Ethics permission was provided by the General University Ethics Panel of the University of Stirling (approval number 3756). Given the topic of the research, special attention was paid to anonymity and confidentiality. All participants were allowed to choose their own pseudonym; for those participants who did not choose a pseudonym, we used an online name generator, using a participant's pronouns to decide whether to choose a 'feminine' or 'masculine' name. Where pronouns were not provided, or were they/them/theirs, gender-neutral names were selected. Participants provided written consent prior to interview, and could withdraw from the research at any time, until six months after the interview had taken place. The interviewers received introductory training in the complexity of the British welfare benefits system prior to conducting interviews, with one of the authors also completing training on the new benefits system being developed in Scotland. Where it was necessary, interviewees used this knowledge to point participants to welfare rights advice to ensure their income was maximised wherever possible.

Emerging signs of dignity: the experience of LGBTQ+ people in Scotland

In presenting our findings, we narrate our analysis with some caution due to the small sample size. For our analysis we start with an account of the Adult Disability Payment (ADP), a policy that was being rolled out at the time of data collection (for which three participants were making applications, one of whom had moved to Scotland specifically to access this benefit). Here, we can start to see how dignity shifts practice to support disabled claimants in contrast to the previous policy on Personal Independence Payments (PIP). However, this potentially reflects a shift in practice towards people with disabilities. As the second part of our analysis shows, across SSS- and DWP-administered benefits, LGBTQ+ people, especially trans people, experience direct and indirect discrimination and barriers which invalidate their existence. This suggests that to truly embrace dignity as a guiding principle for practice requires further reforms at the level of delivery, and cannot rely on policy-level changes and discourse alone.

Insights from Adult Disability Payment claims

As outlined earlier, the Scottish government has been able to change social security support to disabled people through reforms to the administration of PIP with introducing ADP. Both benefits support the additional living costs of disability/longer-term health conditions; they have the same eligibility requirements and payment levels (standard and enhanced). However, ADP is administratively different

from PIP. ADP has adopted a person-centred approach, reliant on written information and medical evidence which is collected as needed (PIP relies on in-person assessment and expects claimants to provide all relevant documentation upfront). PIP has limited initial application options (phone/paper applications), while ADP offers diverse application routes. Furthermore, PIP relies on frequent, intrusive reassessment while ADP offers less frequent, light-touch reviews. From our limited data we can see how this change has already started to impact on the experience of Scottish residents

Table 3: Demographic overview of participants

Gender identity	Count.
Man	31
Woman (incl. cis woman, cisgender female, female)	31
Non-binary (incl. non-binary trans)	14
Gender diverse (gender fluid, gender queer, gender non-conforming, gender non-conforming, trans)	10
Trans (trans woman, trans man)	13
Agender	1
Queer man	1
Ethnicity	Count.
White (incl. three White non-British)	94
Person of colour	9
Sexual orientation	Count.
Gay/gay, queer	32
Lesbian (incl. trans lesbian; lesbian, queer; homoflexible lesbian)	15
Bisexual/pansexual (incl. queer combinations)	29
Queer, wavy	21
Asexual/asexual, queer	5
Heterosexual	3
Disability	Count.
Disabled	57
Not disabled	30
Don't know/Unsure	5
Household and relationship status	Count.
Resident dependents under 16	13
Live with a partner	27
Do not live with partner	67
Age	Count.
18–29	24
30–39	32
40–49	15
50–59	12
60–66	9
67 and over	7

claiming disability support particularly data regarding claims to ADP, and how the experience contrasts with Scottish residents' experiences of claiming Universal Credit (UC) and PIP.

The timing of our research resulted in gathering insights from participants as the change from PIP to ADP was being rolled out to Scottish residents. For some participants, knowledge of the introduction of ADP resulted in a decision to delay a PIP application so that they could apply for the ADP via SSS rather than DWP. As George described:

I've applied for Adult Disability Payment in Scotland, because we knew they were taking it over, and theirs was much more of a hands-off process. And Scotland – Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish government aren't psychopaths like the Conservatives [...] so I did the UC, just the general health one, and didn't apply for PIP, and waited until the Adult Disability Benefit kicked in, and then applied for that online. (George, 33, Heterosexual, Trans, He/Him)

Similarly, Alasdair explained in response to an interviewer's question that he had a much more positive view of the Scottish social security system because it was not run by the UK government:

Interviewer: And so do you think if you had to contact the Scottish social security agency you'd feel more comfortable doing so?

Participant: I wouldn't have an issue with it at all, I probably would feel more comfortable speaking to a Scots voice than a UK government voice. I have nothing against the English obviously, but I do have something against UK government because I think they're a set of lying toads. (Alasdair, 63, Gay, He/Him, Edinburgh)

While these examples were people who perceived a substantial political difference between the Scottish and UK systems, other people were more clearly aware of how the new system in Scotland could make claiming easier, without drawing out the political salience. Kizzy lived in one of the ADP pilot areas and chose to delay their claim for PIP to claim in the new system:

And with Adult Disability Payment, I found out about that because my roommate had tried to apply for PIP, was then denied and they were told, 'Look, there is this new thing coming to Dundee in a couple of months if you can just wait like five months.' (Kizzy, 19, Dundee, Asexual/Queer, Non-binary/Trans)

Interestingly, Kizzy demonstrates how concerns that the shift to multi-level governance of benefits in Scotland might make the system difficult to navigate was not the case. The knowledge they gained through their social networks enabled them to make an active choice to benefit from this complexity.

This perception that the Scottish system *might* be better was borne out by the experience of Eli, who was one of the few participants who had applied under both systems. As such Eli was able to articulate differences between the highly conditional PIP system and the rights-based ADP:

PIP was honestly the worst experience out of any of them [...] I haven't held down a job that isn't self-employment for longer than two months without being fired, because of my absences, because I'm unwell all the time. I'm not able to work full time, and PIP basically determined that I was completely capable of working, with their first assessment. I didn't get any points for anything,

[...]

It was very invalidating actually. I really doubted my disabilities for a while. I thought I was overreacting when I first got back that I had zero points on PIP, and I know that that's obviously just the way that they make things, and that my struggles are not everyone's struggles and whatever, but to be told by a government official that I have no issues ... (Eli, 23, Edinburgh, Pansexual/Queer, They/Them)

This was typical of our participants who had claimed PIP, reflecting wider experiences of the brutality of this system (Patrick, 2024). Another participant, Alannah, described a markedly different experience under ADP:

And the way – because they're not qualified health professionals, the questions they're asking you about it, it's none of their business. It's not applicable because they judge you on the basis are you a risk, a health and safety risk to yourself or others, how well you manage daily tasks. They have no business asking me where some of my problems come from and you think, that's something that I would not divulge with the best will in the world you know, to people unless I'm really close to [them]. (Alannah, 49, East Ayrshire, Bisexual, She/Her)

ADP does not have assessment processes in this way, and indeed a claim can be managed without interacting with SSS at all. This may offer a distinct advantage in creating a more inclusive policy design when compared to UC and PIP. However, the SSS offers in-person appointments to help complete claims. Returning to our participant Kizzy, they took advantage of this, and again provide some insight into a potentially more humane experience reflecting the principles of dignity expressed within Scottish policy:

And she did have questions and, like, I was sort of happy to answer them, but I don't think we should always have to be walking encyclopaedias. Like I find a lot of the time I come out and the answer is, 'Oh, well, what's non-binary and what's this other thing, what is all this?' And I'm like, 'I'm happy to explain that but not everyone is' [...] And I shouldn't have to take like half an hour out of my day just to tell someone who's supposed to be supporting me to find work what like different genders are. (Kizzy, 19, Dundee, Asexual/Queer, Non-binary/Trans)

Care is needed in extrapolating from our data to broader claims as ADP was introduced during our data collection and few Scottish claimants had switched to/applied for this benefit. As such our analysis here is an insight worthy of further investigation. Kizzy, for example, has experience of ADP which suggests that a possible shift from PIP to ADP offers a less intrusive (and abrasive) experience. Thus, we can *tentatively* suggest that the Scottish approach has started to show some signs of adopting a less stigmatising and more supportive approach to social security. But this is perhaps better illustrated in contrast to Scotland resident claimant experiences of reserved aspects of the social security and other forms of support.

Cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions and discrimination

Across all our data we find examples of various forms of direct and indirect discrimination often because of cis- and heteronormative assumptions held by JobCentre Plus staff and PIP assessors. This allows us to illustrate how those aspects of the Scottish system retained by the UK government maintain discrimination towards claimants, which the quotes in the previous section suggest has (potentially) started to be removed from the ADP.

The experiences of trans people within the administration of social security in Scotland – both with the DWP and SSS – was particularly bad because claimants did not ‘fit’ into the system designed around cisnormative assumptions of the gender binary. Our cisgender, non-heterosexual participants thus experienced less of this discrimination. However, it was in their experiences with frontline bureaucrats that heteronormative assumptions of the system were often revealed. This meant that their sexual identity was revealed in unplanned, awkward ways, the most common being through the gender of their partner.

If you say, like, ‘Oh it’s my partner,’ ‘Right, tell me her name.’ It’s not like just, ‘Tell me their name,’ or like [...] For me, I just roll my eyes out and I feel sorry for the person on the phone because I give them a hard time and I don’t think it’s fair because they’ve obviously not had the training or they’ve not got the back up. They’ve not had that, you know, some, they’ve not got whatever it is they need to inform them that they’ve just fucked up really. (Esmond, 36, Fife, Gay, They/He)

Oh, so like, ‘Is this your partner?’ and ‘Oh, I see you’ve ticked bisexual.’ And like, not really your business. You’re treading water here that you shouldn’t be. And I’m just like, it doesn’t matter. And it feels very invalidating. (Quinn, 26, Glasgow, Bisexual, She/Her)

From judgements based on appearance through to assumptions about relationships, hetero- and cisnormative expectations shaped staff interaction with claimants. For staff, they frequently would not be aware of a claimant’s sexuality or gender identity until some form of indicator was provided in conversation, such as through the disclosure of relationship details. However, this awareness did not automatically stop discriminatory language or assumptions informing interactions. For single queer

people this largely meant that their identities were not recognised in any form and so the hetero- and cishnormative assumptions would not be disrupted unless they made an explicit intervention to correct the staff member.

It is not just through interactions that participants could find themselves outed in the system. Inclusion of a CV as part of job search activity was another way in which an LGBTQ+ identity could be revealed:

Yes I'm pretty sure on my CV it said about like how I've participated in like the Philadelphia AIDS walk and things like that, and that I'm part of like LGBT societies in university and like took queer-based classes and things, and so I think my CV is pretty openly queer and so I think it definitely was something that they knew about it, but I don't think that it necessarily then got reflected. I think Restart³ were a bit more open about that but Universal Credit sort of weren't. (Arthur, 27, London, Queer Man, He/His)

This CV content was considered an indirect means of outing a claimant's identity within the DWP, but one that did not translate into adjusted advice or accommodations.

Through our participants it became clear that forms of indirect discrimination and (non-)disclosure of sexuality/gender identity were interlinked aspects of interaction with staff. This is not to say that all indirect discrimination results from non-disclosure. Rather, that staff often start with an assumption of hetero/cishnormative identities of claimants. This creates an exclusionary experience which misrecognises queer identities and, as with the account above, can form microaggressions resulting from prevalent normative assumptions within society and the social security system.

For trans participants deadnaming⁴ occurs across many aspects of their daily lives, including their social security claims. As explained by Grayson, a great deal of this happens within bureaucratic encounters because people socially transition but do not necessarily legally transition because UK gender recognition processes are so appalling and administratively challenging and burdensome. Consequently, deadnaming is frequently experienced:

being trans means that every single step, like you have so many extra admin steps to make sure that everything's in your correct name and to persuade people to change that which they don't really like doing and then because of information-sharing between government departments, they'll manage to find an outdated piece of paper with the wrong name on it and then go through the whole, 'You've changed your name. We want to take your benefits away from you.' It's like, 'No, I haven't. That's not a name I've used in five years, please stop using that,' and because I'm trans, every step of that causes distress. (Grayson, 28, Manchester, Queer)

Another challenge this presented was that the DWP could also then put extra data safeguards around a claimant's file because of these differences in names which would out them as trans. While well-meaning, this was often done without the claimant's consent, and would create further barriers to managing their claim, as experienced by Eli, a resident in Scotland:

Because I identify as non-binary, and because my name is currently different from the name I was born as, only people with specific access are able to access my account when it comes to a lot of different government things, like with HMRC, with certain benefits people, so when I'm phoning PIP, I'd need to phone them, and be like, 'Hey, can you access my account, can I find out the progress of my application?' and then they're like 'Sorry, I have to get someone to call you back, because I don't have access to this for a safeguarding thing,' and I asked them a couple of times. I don't care if people know what my previous name is, I don't mind that. (Eli, 23, Edinburgh, Pansexual/Queer, They/Them)

Discrimination can also be experienced through persistent deadnaming of claimants and their family members. Although deadnaming is not necessarily intended to cause distress, using incorrect names and/or pronouns can result in frustration, stress, anger and upset (Formby, 2015; Gunn et al, 2025). Medusa's experience illustrates how discrimination can also extend to trans children. As trans people under-18 in the UK are excluded from gender recognition processes, this meant faer⁵ child was going to be continually deadnamed while they were receiving Child Disability Payment:

Interviewer: What's your process like at claiming the Scottish child payment then?
Participant: I had to use my child's deadname. All correspondence I receive is going to have my child's deadname on it and they can't legally change the name because it requires both parents and there's no way that it's safe enough to contact him to get his permission ... (Medusa, 44, Glasgow, Queer, Fae/Faer)

Medusa had also been challenged over faer name change, accused of making a fraudulent claim under faer new name, while the old name was on the system, despite being in the process of getting the records updated. This is an administrative barrier that has carried over from when the devolved benefits were run by the DWP. Peg, discussing a request to increase her housing-related benefit so her children no longer had to share a bedroom, told us that the DWP rejected the request as her child did not (and more importantly *could not*) have a Gender Recognition Certificate:

I actually did appeal on that one and they just sent me a big finger. Apparently, it's not their policy to accept children as trans. So, that's the actual, national Universal Credit policy. (Peg, 37, Brighton, Bisexual, She/Her)

Deadnaming and misgendering were ways in which structural heteronormative and cisnormative discrimination played-out in both the DWP-administered system, and the new devolved system. These microaggressions often play out at the individual level of interaction, causing disrespect and harm to the recipient (Nadal et al, 2016). The lack of flexibility in the system had practical impacts for claimants in how applications were completed: despite legally changing their title to Mx, selecting this title is not always an option:

But I've been able to have my legal title which is the gender-neutral 'Mx', which is nice, and something I find in a lot of places, like even applying for student loans I can't put Mx as my legal title [...] And then when you have to tick the box, 'This information is all legally correct to my knowledge and I'm not lying to you,' I'm kind of like, well, I am lying to you and you've not given me an option. (Kizzy, 19, Dundee, Asexual/Queer, Non-binary/Trans)

As other trans participants within the research argued, administrative systems for benefits have no problem with changing the names of cisgender women when they get married, thus these experiences reveal the cisheteronormative assumptions embedded in the design of the systems. By contrast, administrative systems routinely update surnames after marriage for cisgender women, underscoring the asymmetry in name-handling policies.

We have already indicated that universal notions of citizenship have embedded assumptions of sameness that are based on a notion of cisheteronormativity (Gregory and Matthews, 2022). Where legal and policy reforms pursue equality for LGBTQ+ people, this does not mean non-discriminatory practice automatically follows suit. Like experiences related to gender, ethnicity or disability, discriminatory assumptions and practices have persisted within welfare analysis despite progressive policy changes. Scotland's social security reforms, in seeking to place dignity and rights-based principles at the core of reforms, may offer improvements in claimant experiences, but do not implicitly or explicitly recognise and support the diversity of queer identities.

Dignity, LGBTQ+ lives and Scottish Social Security

Focusing on the Scottish social security system allows our analysis to consider the centrality of dignity within policy reforms and how this change at the policy level filters down into the claimant level (Patrick and Simpson, 2020). One challenge facing our Scottish residents more broadly, is the need to navigate two social security systems, whereby some policy is determined by the UK government and other policies are shaped by the Scottish government (Bennett, 2025). As such, there is a dual experience emerging which can be identified in our analysis. On the one hand, those seeking support through SSS, especially in relation to disability, are experiencing a new administrative system which is seeking to prioritise a person-centred approach in order to secure dignity. Our limited analysis of ADP recipients suggests this focus on dignity may have some positive outcomes for claimant experiences when contrasted with experiences of PIP. For Scottish resident LGBTQ+ people claiming social security administered by the DWP, however, their treatment continues to reflect the historic cis/heteronormative assumptions embedded in the foundations of social security. Consequently, Scotland can be seen to be moving towards a system where the principle of dignity is creating some administrative changes. Our early insights suggest a small step in this direction, and one that we can already start to see contrasting with the DWP-administered system, where the relation between the policy level and the claimant level remains one of distrust, scrutiny and ongoing conditionality.

However, the efforts by SSS to embed dignity into the administration of devolved policies means that some LGBTQ+ claimants are starting to experience a reduction in stigmatising practices. But the picture is not so neat. While we note that ADP claimants are starting to experience a less punitive assessment regime, this is primarily

in relation to disability assessment. How claimants experience interactions with social security are still influenced by non-cis and/or non-heterosexual identities. Medusa's Scottish Child Payment was completed using their child's deadname. Eli experienced account access difficulties due to a name change. The language used towards claimants and the language used to discuss relationships retain cis/heteronormative assumptions, which are not only invalidating of the claimant's identity but also demonstrate the lack of training around sexuality and gender identity by those working within the social security system. Despite the wider policy-level shift to encourage dignity, there is still a considerable amount of *equalities work* (Ahmed, 2012) to be carried out to shift the *institutional structures, documents, and power relations* that shape how equality is understood and enacted through SSS. These revisions are necessary if the ambition to place dignity at the core of Scottish social security reforms is to be realised. What our data suggests is that the Scottish government has started to make changes at the policy level (top-down), and this has started to filter down to the claimant level, but this does not yet go far enough to improve the experience of LGBTQ+ claimants.

Where Scotland has the power to do so, inclusive reforms for the LGBTQ+ community will have benefits for all claimants; for example, a system that makes fewer gendered assumptions is less likely to misgender a cisgender claimant with an ambiguous name. As such the efforts to reform delivery of SSS policies should adopt the following recommendations:

- (1) Staff, particularly those interacting with claimants, should take part in LGBTQ+ inclusion training as part of inductions and with regular refresher training.
- (2) Social security agencies should implement a training and inclusion scheme akin to the progress badge scheme in the NHS, where staff who have completed training can wear a badge to signal this.
- (3) Social security agencies should gather appropriate data on sexual and gender identities as part of ongoing equalities monitoring. Analysis of this data should be published as a matter of routine. It should be noted that this is something SSS have done, whereas the DWP collect the data, but do not regularly publish analysis of it.
- (4) Employability support should become LGBT+ inclusive. In city-regions with large LGBT+ populations, agencies could partner with local LGBT+ support organisations to provide tailored support.
- (5) Name changes for trans claimants should be treated in the same way as name changes for people who get married.
- (6) All social security systems should allow people to choose a non-binary gender.
- (7) Trans people should be asked what level of data security they want on their personal data within systems, and agencies should not assume that access to a claim must be tightly restricted producing barriers to accessing basic services.

Conclusion

Evidence from our study, one of the few large qualitative studies of LGBTQ+ social security claimants, provides a novel insight into an important policy shift within Great Britain. The establishment of SSS to revise administration of social security to emphasise dignity as a key principle is an important development in recognising social security as a human right. This contrasts with the approach to social security

provision by the DWP across England and Wales. This principle of dignity can potentially challenge decades of stigmatising narratives and experiences which cause relational harm to social security claimants (Patrick, 2024). However, our analysis demonstrates that it is the administration of policy which determines dignity. Early analysis of a limited number of ADP claimant experiences suggests movement in the right direction, but this is in relation to engagement with people with regard to their disability. Our data suggests that non-cis and non-heterosexual identities remain a source of disruption: direct and indirect discrimination and can result in invalidating experiences and relational harm due to gender identity and sexuality.

The Scottish government has already made promising shifts in how social security systems are designed. This ambition needs to follow through at the claimant level more broadly, to tackle the biases within institutional practice and administrator conduct so that LGBTQ+ identities are treated with the same dignity as was found within ADP practices. Our suggested reforms are some initial steps which SSS can adopt if they truly wish to secure dignity for all claimants within the Scottish Social Security system. Of course, this only benefits Scottish residents applying for social security support administered by SSS. Consequently, we recommend that the DWP adopts the same recommendations, as an initial step for their administrative systems to integrate dignity into their practice.

Notes

¹ <https://www.socialsecurity.gov.scot/reporting/publications/social-security-scotland-client-and-applicant-diversity-and-equalities-analysis-for-april-2023-to-march-2024>.

² Cis(gender): a term used since the 1990s to refer to someone whose gender identity aligns with that they were assigned at birth (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009).

³ An initiative developed by the DWP to assist UC claimants to find and keep employment.

⁴ 'Deadnaming' is the term used to describe someone calling a trans person by their birth name rather than their changed name.

⁵ Fae/faer – neopronouns for people who identify as non-binary, genderfluid, or genderqueer.

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Data availability statement

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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