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Designing basic income pilots for community development: What are the key community concerns? Evidence from citizen engagement in Northern England

Neil Howard^a, Grace Gregory^a, Elliott A. Johnson^b, Cleo Goodman^c, Jonathan Coates^d, Ian Robson^b, Kate Pickett^e and Matthew T. Johnson^b

^aSocial & Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Bath, UK; ^bSocial Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; ^cBasic Income Conversation, London, UK; ^dSt Anthony's Health Centre and Durham University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; ^eDepartment of Health Sciences, Seebohm Rowntree Building, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Policymakers worldwide are realizing that traditional welfare systems need modernization. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with economic, ecological, and social crises intensifying, these systems are being exposed as inefficient, ineffective, and unjust. Policymakers have therefore begun exploring Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a potential alternative. This is leading to rising interest in basic income trials, with pilots proposed or in the pipeline in many countries, including Scotland and Wales. However, pilots are often designed without meaningful community participation, which raises significant ethical and practical concerns. Through a series of qualitative workshops in Jarrow, one of the most deprived areas in the UK and an archetypal target for "Leveling Up" policy, we explored and categorized local concerns, hopes, and suggestions for piloting basic income in the area. This article presents those findings and thereby builds the knowledge base around community perspectives on local basic income pilots.

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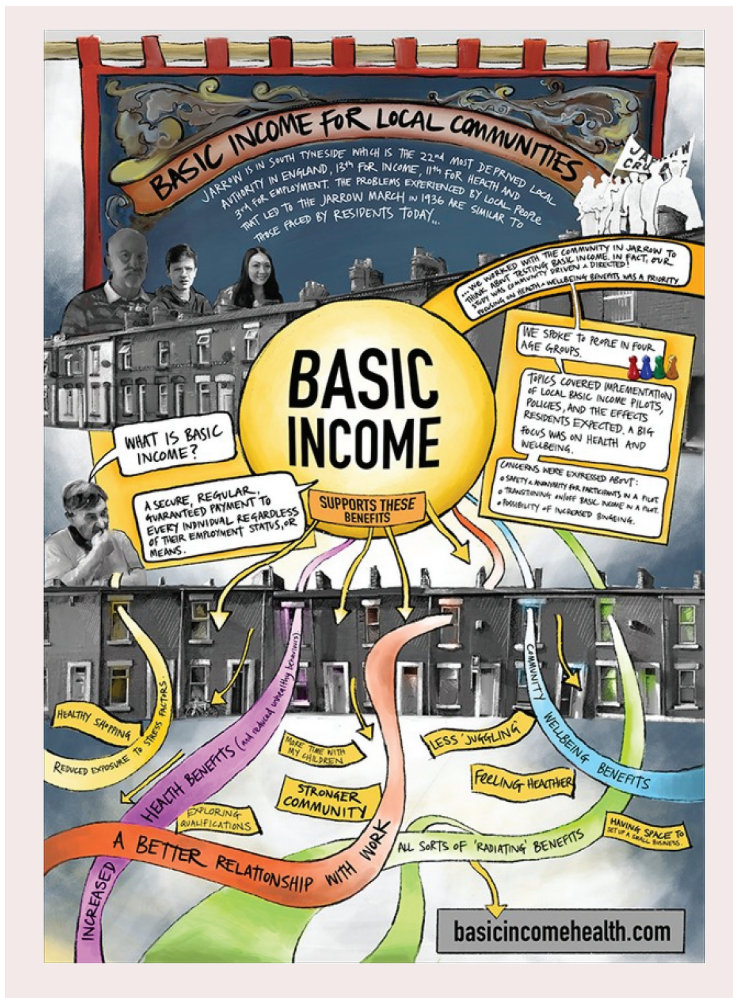
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CONTACT Matthew T. Johnson  matthew7.johnson@northumbria.ac.uk  Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE7 7TR, UK

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Introduction

In recent years, Universal Basic income (UBI) has gone from fringe policy idea discussed primarily in academic circles to one of the major proposals advanced by advocates of welfare reform. Defined as a “periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement” (BIEN no date FAQs, BIEN, 2023), it can be understood to function like a pension, only provided to all people within a given polity, without expectation of previous contributions and in perpetuity. Support for the idea has increased exponentially in the wake of both the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis (Johnson et al., 2022; R&WS Research Team, 2021), which have put an ever-greater share of the population at risk of hardship and destitution.

This support builds on years of well-disseminated research arguing that UBI could be socially and economically transformative. Scholars have long argued, for example, that UBI would be an upgrade compared to traditional welfare structures, since these typically come with hefty administrative price tags alongside significant inclusion and exclusion

errors (Davala et al., 2015; Standing, 2014). Others have suggested that UBI will support human dignity by eliminating the stigma associated with targeting and conditionality (Standing, 2002) and help to remove health-diminishing disincentives to activity for those in receipt (Activity Alliance and IFF Research, 2020; Johnson & Spring, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). Among a range of other prospective benefits, researchers have, most prominently, claimed that UBI could support greater freedom in the labor market by giving people meaningful choice over which kinds of work they accept (Van Parijs, 1997; Widerquist, 2013). In part, this is because it is paid directly to individuals who hold responsibility and authority over its use (Johnson, 2023).

This research has more recently been buttressed by microsimulation modeling, which indicates that the introduction of UBI in places like the UK would trigger large, positive economic effects for the vast majority of communities (Reed et al., 2023). Areas such as South Tyneside, which is representative of the sort of community targeted by the UK Government for its “Leveling Up” policy (see Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022), are likely to benefit disproportionately from the introduction of a basic income policy. The local authority was the 22nd most deprived in England in 2019 based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), 13th for income, 11th for health and third for employment (MHCLG, 2019). Ongoing research into the potential impacts of UBI further supports the idea of greater benefits accruing to those lower down the socioeconomic ladder (Johnson et al., 2022, 2023; Reed et al., 2023).

However, UBI is not universally popular, and many retain concerns over its potentially negative impacts (Johnson et al., 2022, 2023). Classic worries include that it would disincentivize work (Anderson, 2000) or cost too much to be sustainable, with the latter sentiment summarized by Martinelli (2017, p. 43) as “an affordable UBI is inadequate, and an adequate UBI is unaffordable.” Evidence from other cash transfer policies such as tax rebates, the Alaska Permanent Fund dividend (Evans & Moore, 2011), or the casino profits shared among Cherokee Indians (Bruckner et al., 2011), also suggest a potential association with short-term increases in mortality that could be linked to consumption changes enabled by the sudden spike in available resources. Some cash transfer studies suggest negative spillover effects on community members where only certain residents receive and others do not (e.g. Haushofer et al., 2015; MacPhail et al., 2013). Spillover effects need not necessarily be negative *per se* (e.g. Haushofer & Shapiro, 2016) and do not apply to Universal Basic Income policies themselves, since all community members are recipients. However, in piloting of basic income schemes, they do require close ethical consideration nonetheless given the impact on non-participants.

These uncertainties have led to increasing calls for in-depth empirical investigation into the benefits and drawbacks of UBI as a social policy, which has translated into an ever-growing global trend toward basic income piloting, even if the “universal” component remains challenging ahead of full introduction. Indeed, from a handful only 10 years ago, there are now well over 100 pilots or “micro-pilots” investigating basic income’s impacts all over the world (Stanford Basic Income Lab, 2020). While this development may be welcome, the extent of community participation in the design of these trials often remains limited, and available evidence on the ethics of cash-based social experimentation overwhelmingly suggests that this raises both ethical and practical concerns (e.g. Howard, 2022). As Kilne puts it, “Pilots for community members are most successful when they are designed *with* community members” (2022, p. 26).

As such, and in order both to model best practice and to explore community perspectives as we developed a proposal for a basic income pilot in South Tyneside, we conducted a series of qualitative workshops with residents of the community of Jarrow. We did so by building on our model of Citizen Engagement (see Johnson et al., 2023) and on recent work outlining ethical best practice for pilot development (Howard, 2020, 2022; E. Johnson; Johnson et al., 2023). These workshops took place in collaboration with our organizational Public and Private Involvement (PPI) partner, Compass, and Big Local Central Jarrow, a community organization served by Northumbria University's civic agreements.

The findings we describe focus on implementation concerns. We have reported elsewhere community support for key elements of basic income and a basic income pilot itself (Johnson et al., 2023), such as its reduction or elimination of poverty, its provision of social security and its support for prosocial community behavior. Overall, the support presented is consistent with findings on popularity within similar constituencies (Johnson et al., 2023). Here, however, we focus centrally on implementation concerns around local pilots and schemes in light of proposals to pilot basic income in Jarrow and East Finchley (see Johnson et al., 2023)

Background and methods

The authors behind this article are part of an initiative to develop a robust, costed proposal for a basic income micro-pilot in England (Johnson et al., 2023). This initiative partners a number of universities with Basic Income Conversation, a basic income-focused community engagement organization incubated by Compass and now hosted by Autonomy, and two areas supported by Big Local, a civil society project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund that aims to support the development of local power over local development. Big Local Central Jarrow's interest in piloting basic income followed an event hosted by Basic Income Conversation and prompted initial research led by the community with the support of the other partners to understand local concerns. Fortuitously, this interest from the local community matched broader basic income research priorities, as Jarrow is an area likely to be most affected by the introduction of UBI.

The research team held two two-hour workshops at Big Local Central Jarrow with approximately 20 participants in each. Participants were recruited by members of Big Local Central Jarrow using social media and word-of-mouth. Recruitment purposefully aimed to ensure coverage of each of the four main adult generational groups – Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1980), Generation Y/Millennials (born 1981–1996), and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) – to enable workshop findings to reflect concerns across the life course. Care was also taken to ensure gender balance and diversity in terms of occupation and socioeconomic status. All participants were remunerated for their time at Northumbria University research assistance rates to mitigate ethical concerns about exploitation of research participants. The workshops were professionally facilitated and rapporteured. In each case, participants were split into three roughly equally sized groups – Baby Boomers, and Generations X and Y (combined due to lower numbers in each) and Generation Z. All groups were accompanied by a facilitator to guide conversation and prompt discussion around hopes, desires, and concerns related

to UBI and basic income piloting. Each group also had a note-taker present who recorded the conversation and key observations. In the first workshop, “Understanding the Feasibility and Desirability of a Universal Basic Income Pilot,” conversation was framed with the following big-picture questions: “If a pilot were to happen here, what should it look like? What would your hopes be for this pilot? What of your worries? How could it be designed to deal with those worries?” Further prompts included (but were not limited to):

- Who do you think should be part of the pilot?
- How should people be selected to participate?
- Is there anyone who you think should not be involved? Why?
- How much money should people be receiving? And for how long?
- What negative side effects might there be, at individual or community level? How should those be managed?
- How should the pilot manage the changes in people’s lives when the pilot starts and stops?
- How should the pilot protect people against unintended negative side effects?

The second workshop, “What Impact Would a National UBI Have Here?,” built on the findings of the first but sought to explore in greater depth people’s perspectives on UBI as a social policy and not specifically as a pilot. Necessarily, of course, there was overlap in terms of content and the results of the second workshop inform this article as much as those of the first. Discussion prompts for the age-based breakout groups included:

- What do you think about UBI as a policy idea?
- What would be good about it?
- What are your worries about it?
- Should everyone receive the same?
- What about people with additional needs?
- How should additional needs be supported?
- How would they be assessed?
- Are there any situations in which people should have their payments withdrawn?
- How would a national scheme affect different community members?
- How should UBI be funded?

After the workshops, transcripts and hand-written notes were thematically analyzed by the research team to draw out key trends in participant responses. The following section presents the results of this process.

Results

Participants across our age cohorts were intrigued by the idea of UBI as a social policy and felt attracted to the prospect of something as significant as a pilot taking place in the community of Jarrow. Rooting their analysis in their lived experience of life in Jarrow, they offered multiple design suggestions for *how* a pilot should (and should not) work. This section will outline those suggestions, paying attention to differences and similarities within and across our age cohorts.

Pilot design practicalities

In terms of the practicalities of pilot design, and particularly the modalities of pilot participant selection, our workshop groups overwhelmingly favored a process of randomization. This became clear when facilitators asked group members what they thought of the idea of selecting specific parts of the town, such as a particular street or a block of flats, in which all residents would receive the basic income. Generation Z participants thought that this would be dangerous:

Ooh if it was based on a street, I would refuse to leave my house because I'd be scared to leave me house! That's why I think the street one is a bad idea because then that street will get targeted. *Female Participant, Generation Z.*

... Yeah, that's so dangerous when it's specific streets. That would be the worst possible. *Female Participant, Generation Z.*

Members of the Generation X and Y group shared the same worry, with one male participant stating that those “who get these benefits [basic income] are going to be targeted by other members of the community who aren't getting it,” while a female co-participant added, “if it was done really randomly like picking out of a hat, then it would be hard for people to target.” Pilot participant safety was thus a real concern, and this translated consistently into a preference for what one of the Baby Boomers, to general approval, called “a lottery type of selection.” Ideas for how such a lottery could be operationalized varied. Some suggested widely advertising the pilot, having people apply to participate, then drawing names from a hat. Others suggested picking at random from the electoral roll.

It is important to note that safety here ties in closely with the notion of fairness in the context of generalized poverty and precarity, which became clear when we probed why a pilot built around a particular locality might be dangerous. One of the younger participants from Generation Z explained:

This whole concept [of a pilot in Jarrow] excites me, I mean, I'd love to be one of the people who got the money to see how I'd change ... But the worry, I keep telling you, is that jealousy – people getting attacked, people's homes getting broken into, people getting targeted because they've got that extra money, while the person next door and everyone else is struggling just the same. *Female Participant, Generation Z*

Although most of those in our workshops favored the idea of random selection, a significant number also proposed a degree of categorical targeting to ensure that the pilot had the greatest chance of scientifically demonstrating the impacts of basic income on different groups. In the words of one female Generation Y participant:

You've got to pick 10 of one kind of income, 10 of another, 10 random people with children, 10 single people, 10 older people, so you've got a mix, and you've got at least a certain number who you can compare with each other. *Female Participant, Generation Y*

A Generation Z female participant emphasized the need to have diversity also in terms of gender, age, work, and disability. Likewise, a Baby Boomer participant said “you should do it how you did it here in age groups”.

There was a clear understanding among participants of the nature and potential political impact of social research and thus the importance of sample selection. This

was made especially clear in the discussion with the Generation X and Y group, which turned to the importance of labor contract type when understanding people's life circumstances in the community:

I think contract is a really good way [to select pilot participants] because if you think about zero-hour contracts and the effect they have on people's health, that would be really interesting to explore. *Female Participant, Generation Y.*

For similar reasons, participants across age cohorts suggested that it made sense to exclude those at the higher end of the wealth spectrum:

I understand in a pure basic income trial everybody would get it, but for this, thinking about the most benefit for our area, I think there should be a cut off . . . and I think that's fair in terms of what we're trying to do. *Female Participant, Generation Y.*

With regards to length of pilot, participants within each group struggled to agree. For instance, some argued that a longer pilot would help evidence the long-term benefits, whilst others favored a shorter period as "weening off" the pilot might be harder the longer it went on. When one male participant within the Generation Z cohort suggested that a pilot should run for two years, some agreed but others quickly contested his position. Likewise, when a male participant from the Generation X and Y group argued that a pilot should run for a shorter period, "because if it's going to be long, you're going to be so depressed when it ends, but if it's short you're going to think oh well it's only for a month or so", some nodded but others disagreed. People within the Baby Boomer group had similarly conflicting views, with one participant believing "three months" would be best, whilst another said "No, years. I would say at least a year to see if there were differences in people".

Similar differences were observed when it came to proposed size of payment. The general consensus among the Generation Z group was that the money should be "at least over what benefits would be." A female participant from that group suggested "National minimum wage on full time hours, that's about £1600 because that way it's bringing people up to that threshold and that is the point behind this pilot – not leaving people behind."

The Generation X and Y group found it harder to agree on a set amount, with one female participant stating that "it's a really hard one, it's different – you might have a family, you might have a single parent with five kids." The Baby Boomer group tended to agree that it could be difficult to set a default amount, with one female participant pointing out that "everyone has different lifestyles, a different amount for every different person, they can't just give a block sum to everybody because their lives are all different". In the Generation X and Y group, one male participant argued that "£1600 is too much money, I think about £400; if I have more, I'm just going to waste it", while another male stated that he initially thought "£1600 would be far too much but when everyone around us breaks it down, you would be paying full rent once this comes in, all your prescriptions, all your kids" school meals, everything.'

Risks of a basic income pilot

Given the enormous complexities inherent in social experimentation (Howard, 2022), it is perhaps unsurprising that the potential risks of a basic income pilot were such a focus for participants. This focus emerged organically, although group facilitators were instructed to ensure ample space for participants to explore any worries they had around a pilot's potential to do harm through unintended consequences. As the discussion above suggests, core concerns included *conflict* and *crime*, but others emerged around *recipient dependence*, the potential for *harmful bingeing*, and *the interaction between basic income and existing welfare structures*.

Beginning with dependence, a common theme emerged across all age groups that basic income recipients could become reliant on the money they receive as part of a pilot. One male participant in the Generation X and Y group said a key worry for him was that by the end of the trial people would struggle to adapt, stating that "it's just a matter of . . . how people would cope with it, because there would [be] a downside – people would become dependent on it."

Similar concerns stand out from the following exchange between the facilitator and a male participant in the Baby Boomer group:

Participant: It would give a few people a lot of money for a short period of time, wouldn't it? I wonder what it would be like when they come off it?

Facilitator: That's a good question. It's one of the big questions we actually need to think about. How do you imagine this pilot would manage, help people manage, that change of when you come on and when you come off [receiving basic income]?

Participant: You can't – there might be more mental health issues, people might be a mess after the money. People tend to live in their means or be in debt.

Exchange between facilitator and male participant, Baby Boomer.

A female participant from the Generation Z group shared a similar perspective:

I think you'd have to be very careful at the back end of it. It's almost . . . like you'd have to give them a weening off. If I was to get an extra two grand, I'd get rid of me horrible car. I'd get a nice new one, probably on . . . five-year finance. It's gonna get to the end of the two years [of the basic income trial] and I'm gonna be living short at the end of it if because I would have started getting used to having that extra money. *Female Participant, Generation Z.*

A second concern that transcended age groups (but which was most extensively discussed by the eldest and youngest of our participants) was bingeing and the potential spike in unintentional self-harm triggered by the influx of extra resources for pilot participants. Beginning with the Baby Boomer group, the eldest male participant offered the following observation:

if I know the people that I know in Jarrow, if any of them got £1000 I know where it would be going, *doodoodoole*, they would be drunk! . . . I've watched it my whole life . . . People have got money in their pockets knowing they want the pints. *Male Participant, Baby Boomer.*

Likewise, a Generation Z female participant added:

A lot of people I know, if they got this, would probably be dead after a couple of months... I think for the first while there probably will be a lot of deaths, like with people like going out of control with the money. *Female Participant, Generation Z.*

Although this discussion also came up within the Generation X and Y group, perspectives were divergent. One participant said

All of a sudden, they might be wearing different clothes, they might be healthier, they might all drive cars or there'll be more drug use. If you look at certain areas, there's already quite bad drug use and bad alcoholism; would these benefit from extra money if they're not going to use it wisely? It sounds like I'm pessimistic but I'm just trying to see it quite broadly. *Female Participant, Generation Y.*

By contrast, another female participant who had previously engaged in basic income debates offered the following counter:

I'm trying really hard to sit on my hands here because I think my understanding is that the research shows, from the longer-term trials, that the jury's still out about what happens in terms of drug use and alcohol – because people's stress rates can be lower, there might actually be a slight drop [in substance abuse] in the long term. But it doesn't mean in the short term that that's the case. *Female Participant, Generation Y.*

A third issue for our workshop participants was around conflict and crime. Echoing the discussion above over the importance of randomization, one woman in the Generation Z group said forcefully:

I think the pilot is going to create more crime... Like having been born and raised here, if I lived next door to a street that was going to get an extra two grand a month compared to me, and I'm not aggressive or like a crime person or anything like that, but I'd probably go to their house and rob them in minutes. Like there's no chance I'd be with me bairn struggling with no heating on when I know they're two grand up. No, no. *Female Participant, Generation Z.*

However, although the link between perceptions of “unfairness” and the criminal targeting of recipients by non-recipient fellow residents was clear, as discussed in an earlier section, there was debate among our groups over the potential impact of a basic income pilot on crime more broadly. One young man from the Generation Z group said:

If people got an income nothing to do with their job, what about the crime rate – would it go down? Just obviously cos you can buy stuff instead of stealing from the shop. Obviously, where I work, it's like, we'll get shoplifters in every day... The police don't do anything about it... But if people are receiving money and not stealing, would that even free up the police more? *Male Participant, Generation Z*

This then expanded into a wider conversation when prompted by the facilitator on whether people having more money from a basic income would affect the crime rate:

Participant 1: I mean, there's some people that I've seen lately stealing that look well off so, I mean, I don't think it would change much... I think maybe the thrill of doing it, that might be why people are doing it...

Facilitator: So, you reckon it wouldn't change?

Participant 2: No no, I don't think people have enough money now [to get by], especially with the cost of living as well.

Participant 3: So, like our food shopping today – it was a lot of money and I hardly got anything . . .

Facilitator: So, do you two think a bit of extra income through a basic income would make a difference?

Participant 3: Yes, I think it would reduce crime but like I think maybe not so much crime, but bad habits that can lead to crime like the drug ones. Yeah, I do think it will stop a lot of shoplifting. . .

Exchange between facilitator and two female participants, generation Z

The final – and perhaps most significant – risk raised by our workshop participants, on which there was no disagreement within or across our age groupings, related to the impacts of a pilot basic income on recipients' existing benefits. A significant portion of those we spoke to and of the wider community of Jarrow rely on different kinds of state-provided social protection, ranging from housing support to Universal Credit, child support or disability benefits (see discussion of disability in Johnson et al., 2023). Often, this support plays a decisive role in household budgeting, while in the case of housing allowance, it is structurally interwoven with the organization of people's daily lives. Given this, concerns over the destructive or destabilizing impacts that participating in a basic income pilot may have are inevitable. The Generation Z group, for example, was particularly animated over the effect that basic income might have on student loan repayments, as well as on already complex debt management plans. One participant explained:

we've got a debt management plan because we have so much debt. They've got it down to an affordable amount on what our current incomes are and what we pay out, but once we have an extra grand coming in [from a pilot], that's going to change the full plan I've got with them. *Female Participant, Generation Z*

Others concurred, adding that if the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) classed any pilot monies received as income, then they may take away existing benefits. This would be especially challenging at the end of the pilot, because, as one male participant stated, "it is hard getting back on benefits and so recipients could face challenges once the trial was finished."

The Generation X and Y group was also concerned about such unintended consequences for people and the research itself:

I think the stress that it will cause people worrying about the end, we need to find a way to support people to manage that stress because that will have an opposite effect to what we thought, which is the trial making things easier. *Male Participant, Generation X.*

Some of the Baby Boomer group agreed with this sentiment, with one female participant going as far as to declare, "I wouldn't like to get it, because it'll affect my rent."

Mitigating risks

While the risks associated with piloting basic income featured heavily in our workshop conversations, in each case, discussion turned to how those risks could be mitigated to ensure that pilots took place ethically and with due care for participant wellbeing. In this, the final empirical section of the paper, we will summarize the mitigation strategies proposed by our workshop participants. For clarity, these can be categorized around the themes of *protection*, *support*, and *coordination with the authorities* (see discussion in Johnson E, Johnson et al., 2023).

With regards to participant *protection*, the first and most important mitigation strategy proposed was randomization. As is already clear from the discussion above, respondents overwhelmingly rejected the idea of a place-based pilot in which everyone would receive the basic income and instead advocated random selection of participants, primarily to ensure safety. In addition, they emphasized the importance of maintaining recipient anonymity to help protect people from any backlash. As one member of the Generation Z group put it, “if you’re sensible and don’t want to get yourself hurt, then it’s on you to not tell people.”

Regarding *support*, all three age groups agreed that providing structured, relational support to recipients during the pilot would be of paramount importance. The Generation Z group, for example, discussed the idea of having quarterly group meetings for pilot participants, as well as offering counseling, with one group member saying, “that’s not even a question; that should definitely be done.” Another added:

At these meetings, there could maybe be specialists to help with the mental health aspect in case people are struggling, maybe a financial advisor there as well, you know official types who can help if it’s not going as well as they’d hoped. *Male Participant, Generation Z.*

Others took this suggestion on and proposed the alternative of one-on-one counseling sessions for participants who prefer to remain anonymous or outside of a group setting. One argued that “this could be extended to have contact throughout the full process, almost like a helpline”, which could be made available to anyone participating in the pilot whenever they are in need. Similarly, the Generation X and Y group agreed that participants in the pilot “would definitely need to have support – that is a priority”, with the example given of Big Local Central Jarrow-style community organizing/social work as a model to follow. In addition, members of this group mentioned the importance of financial support: “if you’re not used to paying your own rent and things, then help managing those monthly outgoings”. One woman in the X and Y group thought that this was so essential that “if there was structured support like that, I’d consider participating”.

Discussion of support requirements also focussed on the critical period leading up to and after the end of the pilot, when many feared that participants would be at their most vulnerable. One female participant in the Generation X and Y group specified that at “the bare minimum what we’d have to do is help them get back into the support systems that they had before the trial took place.” Other ideas included counseling, financial advice, and support with adapting to budgetary changes.

Of similar importance, all three of our age groups stressed how essential it was to understand how receiving basic income would interact with current systems, including student loans, housing, debt management plans, taxes, child support, Universal Credit,

and other benefits. Understandably, participants did not have detailed ideas about how this could be managed administratively or logistically. As evidence from sister studies in places like the US suggests, pilot designers will need “to engage multiple state agencies to understand and safeguard participants’ benefits eligibility” (Kline, 2022, p. 39).

Discussion

The limited literature that exists on the ethics of cash pilot design strongly suggests that community consultation is essential (Howard, 2020, 2022; Kline, 2022). This literature argues that “the risks to potential pilot participants are of paramount importance and must be weighed against the potential benefits to them and to society” (Howard, 2022, p. 11). Whilst some risks may reasonably be assumed to be context independent, others will inevitably be context-specific and understanding those requires, at a minimum, “a full, informed and participatory risk assessment” (Howard, 2022, p. 11), which can only ever be conducted meaningfully alongside the people whose lives are entwined with the context in question. In the case of Jarrow, the consultations documented here represent the first stage of such a participatory risk assessment and they point toward some interesting conclusions.

The first is that anything other than a fully random selection of participants from across the community could be dangerous and therefore *unethical* in this context, since the generalized poverty and precarity of the area mean that perceived unfairness in participant selection could trigger interpersonal conflict and crime. This goes squarely against recent calls, including by the present authors, for less individualized randomization and for more place-based community-level basic income trials. Writing elsewhere, we have argued that within-community randomization may itself be unethical (see Howard, 2022), since there is evidence from cash transfer trials that the negative wellbeing impact on non-recipient neighbors may outweigh the positive wellbeing impact on recipients (Haushofer et al., 2015). We have further argued that place-based community-level trials could better reflect future national UBI policies and enable greater examination of the sociological effects of a universal system. Lastly, there is evidence from ongoing trials such as the one that Howard presently leads in India that community trials are possible without triggering interpersonal violence.¹

For the prospective Big Local Basic Income micro-pilot, and based on community engagement, we proposed (Johnson et al., 2023) advertising the micro-pilot to the entire (18+) community in each Big Local area involved (Jarrow and The Grange, East Finchley, London). This would request that individuals express an interest in taking part before randomly selecting 15 participants, underpinned by quotas to achieve local representativeness, as far as possible, and diversity in a small sample, as well as limiting selection to one individual per household. After an initial round of advertising, further specific recruitment might then be needed should the sample not be sufficiently representative and diverse. Alternatives to random selection across the whole area or selection of all households in one smaller location might be a clustered design where a number of very small geographic units are selected. This might mitigate, though not eliminate, the risks of identification of participants and of a larger, more visible area being targeted with antisocial behavior by or simply negative reactions from non-recipients. In addition, random recruitment across the whole population through advertising does have

potential ethical and experimental design implications with regard to the disappointment experienced by those who are assigned to the control group. Random selection from the electoral register has the benefit of mitigating this issue, though not necessarily eliminating it since non-participants in small areas are likely to become aware of the study, particularly if any individuals selected choose not to take part. However, there are potential ethical concerns in relation to a control group being formed of people who are unaware of the experiment. In addition, only routinely collected data from the control group would be available, which is unlikely to supply data on a number of areas of interest to communities, researchers, and policymakers. Selection of participants is, perhaps, the key emerging challenge for such studies given the competing interests of participant safety, replication of likely future policies, maintenance of effective experimental conditions (as far as is possible) and pragmatic issues in relation to securing sufficient funding for larger studies. Further research into this issue and further community consultation in Jarrow and beyond is therefore essential.

A second interesting conclusion from this round of consultation centers on the importance of a basic income pilot including relational add-ons that complement the cash. Within the field of cash piloting, and in particular within cash transfer research, there has recently been a recognition that non-cash “plusses” can have significant positive impacts that enhance the impact of cash on recipients (e.g. Davala et al., 2015; Roelen et al., 2017). This recognition initially led cash transfer programs to include simple technical add-ons like financial literacy training for their recipients, but, increasingly, more innovative additions like counseling and even community organizing in cash trials (e.Ton et al., 2022) are being incorporated. The fact that our workshop participants called for these additions without being familiar with the history of cash transfer piloting is significant and suggests that the field may be moving in line with community desires. A second point of relevance here is that workshop participants framed these suggested relational add-ons not solely in terms of effectiveness but as vital elements of participant safeguarding. They identified dependence, self-destructive behavior, and financial-bureaucratic challenges as issues that pilot participants would *need* support to navigate. In this sense “wraparound” support for pilot participants could come to be understood as potential best practice for would-be pilot designers (see also Kline, 2022). There is a challenge here, however, as national basic income policies may be unlikely to be able to provide similar support at sufficient (population) scale. In addition, the challenges relating to interaction with existing forms of conditional support are unlikely to exist (at least in the current form) were basic income to be introduced at national level. There remains, therefore, a tension between piloting schemes that reflect likely future policies and addressing issues arising from the current system.

Further points of relevance include the manifest importance of more – and deeper – engagement to develop communication materials that both explain the pilot to the community and support meaningful informed consent for pilot participants, as well as to finalize the sample in question. For example, in places like Jarrow, where zero-hours contracts and multiple forms of precarious employment are widespread and particularly important determinants of wellbeing, being able to capture the nuances of basic income’s impact on those issues is both scientifically and politically important. Such insights may be missed should pilot designers approach sample composition with pre-

conceived and/or external criteria not rooted in local understandings of local realities. In this respect, the present article and the community concerns it reports add weight to wider arguments around the importance of participatory development (e.g. Burns et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This article strongly supports the notion that incorporating “community wisdom” is essential for researchers and social policymakers wishing to build robust, effective, and ethically sound basic income trials. Interest in basic income and in its piloting clearly exists among so-called “left behind” or “red wall” communities like Jarrow, which are typically depicted as opposed to progressive reforms that decouple social protection from notions of “deservingness”. At the same time, it is evident that for communities such as this, which often bear the brunt of social policy changes and, in particular, of welfare reform, consultation matters. Ethical, effective piloting must be based on in-depth community engagement and ultimately on meaningful co-production. Community consultations such as those reported here are an important step in that direction. As this paper aims to make clear, they are also necessary, since they create space for the depth and breadth of contextual knowledge to be brought to bear on the difficult questions at the heart of pilot design.

Note

1. See www.work-free.net.

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ORCID

Elliott A. Johnson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0937-6894>

Matthew T. Johnson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9987-7050>

Ethics

This study was approved by the Northumbria University Ethics Committee (2237).

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