Social Security Experience Panels: Agency Recruitment

Equality, Poverty and Social Security

social research

Contents

Introduction

In July and August 2018, the Scottish Government carried out a survey and focus groups with Experience Panel members to understand their past experience of looking for jobs, their awareness of Social Security Scotland recruitment drives and their perceptions of working for the Civil Service. We also asked Experience Panel members about any barriers they had faced when applying for jobs in the past and how we could make applying for jobs more accessible. This work was part of the Scottish Government's Social Security Experience Panel programme of research.

This report details the findings and key themes that emerged from this work.

Summary

Looking for jobs

Most survey respondents had experience of looking for a job at one point in their lives (92 per cent) with almost a third (31 per cent) having looked for a job in the last 5 years. The most popular places to look for a job tended to be online, such as on recruitment websites (68 per cent) or an organisation's own website (57 per cent). Offline methods were less popular, but still well used. Over two thirds of survey respondents had visited a JobCentre Plus (67 per cent) whilst almost half had asked for recommendations from friends and family (48 per cent).

Most survey respondents were not aware of previous Social Security Scotland recruitment drives (75 per cent). Participants who were aware tended to find out through the Scottish Government's website (50 per cent) or a news website (27 per cent). A smaller number found out through the agency's recruitment website (17 per cent), newspaper advertisements (16 per cent) or search engines (17 per cent).

Making the recruitment process accessible

Over half of survey respondents (54 per cent) told us they had encountered barriers when looking or applying for a job. Survey respondents and focus group participants told us that improving job adverts could improve accessibility and reduce barriers for disabled people looking for work. Respondents were shown a sample job advert used by Social Security Scotland and asked for their views. We heard that it is important for job adverts to contain the right kind of information, and to minimise the amount of unnecessary text. Participants felt the adverts should be 'short' and 'punchy' and explicitly state that they welcome applications from disabled people and minority groups.

It was felt that job adverts must clearly define the duties expected of the applicant to allow disabled applicants to apply with confidence. Descriptions of the interview process and the Civil Service competency system were often seen as confusing and could be simplified to increase accessibility.

Participants felt that job adverts often missed essential information that is helpful for disabled applicants to know, such as flexible working policies, information on reasonable adjustments and how to request documents in different formats.

Participants wanted the language used in adverts to be plain English and uncomplicated. The use of percentages in job adverts was thought to be confusing and sometimes unnecessary.

When applying for a job, participants said they would value being able to apply online and through a paper application form. The application form itself should be simple and easy to complete to avoid putting disabled clients off.

Views on the interview process included that there should be a disabled person on interview panels to give confidence to disabled applicants that the organisation takes accessibility needs into account. It was also expressed that interviewers should make a decision based on what the client says, rather than what they are wearing on the day. Participants felt that care should be taken so that interviewers do not dress overly formally.

Participants told us that information they would find useful, but was often missing from adverts included a point of contact to discuss accessibility arrangements, explicit information about the flexible working arrangements and information on how to receive feedback.

An employer's own people policies were seen as important in creating an accessible recruitment policy. Participants felt that flexible shift patterns, the ability to take medical leave without feeling unsupported and a willingness to make adjustments to the role to allow them to perform it with their disability were important.

Whilst employers' actions can go some way to creating an accessible recruitment process, participants identified a number of wider factors that caused issues when applying for jobs that were outwith an individual employer's control. This included benefits policy and the complex ways in which social security payments interacted with paid employment.

Other factors were more personal to the client, such as not having money to purchase clothes for an interview, not being able to use a computer or not being able to afford to travel to interviews.

Working for the Civil Service

Participants had both positive and negative perceptions of what it was like to work for the Civil Service. Positive perceptions referenced a good pension, relative job security and the work environment. Some participants said they would feel proud if a child or close relative was offered a Civil Service job.

Negative perceptions tended to refer to individual experiences participants had with civil servants, describing them as being 'robotic', 'inflexible' and 'unhelpful'. Some viewed civil servants as 'unreliable'.

Civil Service culture was described as 'target-driven' to the detriment of those who interact with the service.

Participant's perceptions tended to come from the media, family and friends and their interactions with government departments (usually DWP or other public facing organisations such as DVLA). Participants rarely viewed civil servants differently between departments.

Some participants made a distinction between Scottish Government civil servants and those of Westminster, viewing the Scottish Civil Service as being more trustworthy and honest.

Most participants had not considered a career in the Civil Service, and they felt that other factors would influence whether they would consider a job with Social Security Scotland more than their perceptions of the Civil Service as a whole.

Background and research methods

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits previously delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions. As part of the work to prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels. The Experience Panels are made up of over 2,400 people from across Scotland who have recent experience of at least one of the benefits being devolved to Scotland.

The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design a new social security system that works for the people of Scotland, based on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect.

To deliver the benefits devolved to Scotland, the Scottish Government have established Social Security Scotland ('the agency') who will be responsible for administering Scotland's new social security system. As part of the creation of the new agency, we have worked with Experience Panel members to understand their expectations around both agency recruitment processes and what staff should be like.

This report details the key themes which emerged from a survey and fifteen focus groups which took place in July and August 2018. The research considered:

- Panel member's experiences looking for work, and barriers experienced in recruitment processes;
- Awareness of past Social Security Scotland recruitment drives;
- How the agency's recruitment process can be made more accessible; and
- Perceptions of working for the Civil Service, and how this could impact on decisions to apply for a role with the agency.

Participants were recruited from the Scottish Government Experience Panels. All Experience Panel members were invited to take part in the survey and focus groups. The survey covered Experience Panel members experiences of looking for

work and their awareness of previous agency recruitment drives. The focus groups covered Experience Panel members' experiences of looking for work, and their views on how to create an accessible recruitment process.

The Social Security Experience Panels are a longitudinal research project. The panels are made up of volunteers from the Scottish population who have experience of at least one of the benefits that will be devolved to Scotland. The results of this work should be regarded as being reflective of the experience and views of the respondents only, and are not indicative of the wider Scottish population. The number of responses for the survey was relatively small and this should be kept in mind when considering the results. Percentages are given only to give a broad sense of the balance of opinion across respondents.

Focus Groups

15 focus groups were held in locations across Scotland[1]. Flipcharts and post-it notes were used to facilitate discussion and capture the views of all participants. As part of the focus groups, participants were shown a sample job advert and asked to comment on each section.

Survey Method

All 2,456 Experience Panel members were invited to take part in the survey. Participation in Experience Panels research is optional, and in this case 168 people chose to complete the survey (a response rate of 6.84 per cent).

This information was added to information from the '*About Your Benefits and You*'[2] and '*Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*'[3] surveys. The demographic data collected in these surveys was linked to the information supplied by participants of this survey as part of the longitudinal data set for this project.

Four in ten survey respondents identified as 'man or boy' (40 per cent) and six in ten as 'woman or girl' (60 per cent).

Table 1: Gender of survey respondents (n=134)

Gender	%
Man or boy	40
Woman or girl	60
Total	100

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[1] Dumfries, Edinburgh, Fort William, Glasgow, Greenock, Hamilton, Inverness, Irvine, Kirkcaldy and Lanark

[2] Scottish Government (2017). *Social Security Experience Panels: About Your Benefits and You – Quantitative Research Findings*. [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/11/7769/

[3] Scottish Government (2018). *Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*. [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083/

Almost nine in ten survey respondents were aged 45 or over (87 per cent) with just over one in ten aged between 25 and 44 (13 per cent). No survey respondents were under the age of 25 or aged 80 and over.

Table 2: Age of survey respondents (n=135)

Age	%
Under 25	0
25 – 44	13
45 – 59	48
60 – 79	39
80 or over	0
Total	100

Almost nine in ten survey respondents (86 per cent) considered themselves to have a disability or long term health condition.

Table 3: Disability status of survey respondents (n=135)

Disability Status	%
Disabled	86
Not Disabled	14
Total	100

Over two thirds of survey respondents (67 per cent) had a physical disability. A large number of participants also reported having chronic pain (61 per cent) or another type of long term health condition (66 per cent). Around one in ten respondents had a severe hearing impairment (12 per cent) and/or a severe visual impairment (10 per cent).

Table 4: Disability types of survey respondents (n=133-135)[4]

Disability Type	%
Has a physical disability	67
Has chronic pain	61
Has a mental health condition	29
Has a severe hearing impairment	12
Has a severe visual impairment	10
Has a learning disability	8
Has another kind of disability or long term health condition	66

Just over two in five survey respondents was a carer for a friend or family member (43 per cent).

Table 5: Caring status of survey respondents (n=129)

Carer Status	%
Carer	43
Not a carer	57
Total	100

Survey respondents most commonly cared for an adult friend or relative (32 per cent) and over a fifth was a carer due to old age (23 per cent).

Table 6: Who do survey respondents care for (n=135)[5]

Person who they care for	%
Cares for an adult	32
Cares for a child	12
Carer due to old age	23

Survey respondents took part from twenty-eight of the thirty-two local authorities, with the majority living in an urban area (67 per cent).[6]

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[4] Participants were able to select multiple options.

[5] Percentages include all participants who took part. Participants were able to select multiple options.

Table 7: Location of survey respondents (n=135)

Location	%
Urban	67
Rural	19
Prefer not to say	15
Total	101

Survey respondents who took part had experience of claiming a wide range of benefits. The most common benefits claimed by survey respondents were Personal Independence Payment (65 per cent) and Disability Living Allowance (63 per cent). The least common benefits claimed were Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit (6 per cent) and Sure Start Maternity Grant (8 per cent).

Table 8: Respondents benefit experience [7](n=135)

Benefit	%
Personal Independence Payment	65
Disability Living Allowance	63
Winter Fuel Payment	36
Carer's Allowance	33
Cold Weather Payment	31
Discretionary Housing Payment	24
Universal Credit	23
Attendance Allowance	22
Scottish Welfare Fund	18
Severe Disablement Allowance	16
Funeral Expenses	8
Sure Start Maternity Grant	8
Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit	6

[6] 17% of the Scottish population lives in a rural area - Scottish Government (2018). *Rural Scotland Key Facts 2018*. [Online] Available at: www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00541327.pdf

[7] Participants had experience of applying for (themselves or someone else) or receiving these benefits within the last 3 years, but were not necessarily in receipt of the benefit at the time of the survey.

More detailed demographic information on the Experience Panels as a whole can be found in 'Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far'[8].

Looking for jobs

Social Security Scotland want to make sure that people who have lived experience of the social security system feel able to apply for jobs within Social Security Scotland, allowing the agency to benefit from their experience and skills. As part of this, we wanted to understand how they can make the recruitment process more accessible to people with disabilities, caring responsibilities and long term health conditions.

As a first step in understanding how the recruitment process could be improved, we spoke to Experience Panel members about their past experiences of looking for jobs and whether they had encountered any barriers whilst doing so.

Previous experience of looking for jobs

Over nine in ten survey respondents had experience of applying for a job at some point (92 per cent), with just under a third having applied for a job within the last five years (31 per cent).

Table 9: Survey respondent experience of looking for jobs (n=167)

Experience of looking for jobs	%
I have experience applying for jobs	31
I have experience of applying for jobs, but I have not applied in the last 5 years	61
I do not have experience of applying for jobs	8
Total	100

Respondents who had experience of looking for a job were asked where they had looked in the past. The most common methods tended to involve looking online – for example, looking at recruitment websites (68 per cent) and looking directly on the websites of specific organisations (57 per cent).

Offline methods were still popular, with over two thirds of respondents (67 per cent) having visited a JobCentre Plus to look for work. Other offline methods used by survey respondents included asking friends or family for recommendations (48 per cent), looking in newspapers (43 per cent) and volunteering (36 per cent). The other methods of looking for a job, such as going to a jobs fair or approaching a recruitment agency or careers advisor were used by less than one in five respondents.

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[8] Scottish Government (2018). *Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*. [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083

Table 10: Where survey respondents looked for jobs (n=66-69)

Where	%
Recruitment websites	68
JobCentre Plus	67
Organisation-specific website	57
Recommendations from family and friends	48
Newspapers	43
Volunteering	36
Through an apprenticeship, internship or temping	19
Through a recruitment agency or careers advisor	18
Window adverts	18
Through a support organisation	15
At a jobs fair	14

We asked survey respondents who told us they had looked online what websites they had visited. In total, respondents mentioned 36 unique websites a total of 111 times. Websites were grouped into the categories below by the researcher.

Table 11: Types of website used

Website	Mentions
Online recruitment aggregators (such as S1 Jobs or Indeed.co.uk)	67
Private organisation-specific websites	16
Public sector job websites (such as Work For Scotland, NHS Scotland Jobs and Civil Service Jobs)[9]	13
Universal Job Match (DWP)	9
Third sector organisation websites	3
Non-typical job websites (such as Facebook)	2
Professional networking site (LinkedIn)	1

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[9] Excludes Universal Job Match, the Department for Work and Pensions website which is used by benefit claimants to find jobs but is not where public sector jobs are typically advertised.

Awareness of existing agency recruitment

In order to find out who had been reached by previous Social Security Scotland recruitment drives, we asked survey respondents whether they were aware if the agency had been recruiting staff over the past few months.

A quarter of survey respondents (25 per cent) said they had heard about Social Security Scotland's recruitment, with three quarters (75 per cent) saying they had not.

Respondents who had heard about the agency's recuitment primarily found out about this online, such as through the Scottish Government's website (50 per cent), news websites (27 per cent) or through Social Security Scotland's website (17 per cent). A small number of respondents found out about agency recruitment through friends and family (17 per cent), newspaper advertisements (16 per cent) or search engines (14 per cent).

Table 12: Where respondents heard about previous agency recruitment (n=130-132)

Where respondents heard about previous agency recruitment	%
On the Scottish Government website	50
On a news website	27
On Social Security Scotland's website	17
Through family and friends	17
In a newspaper	16
Using a search engine	14

When asked where they would expect future Social Security Scotland jobs to be advertised, survey respondents gave a wide range of suggestions, grouped into the categories below by the researcher.

Table 13: Where should agency jobs be advertised in future

Where respondents want agency jobs advertised in future	%
Other types of advertising – billboards, on public transport, etc.	13
On social media	11
Through third sector organisations	7
Local and national newspapers	7
In schools, colleges and universities	7
On public sector job websites	6
In medical venues	3
At JobCentre Plus	2
At job fairs	2
On the Social Security Scotland website	1
On professional networking websites (such as LinkedIn)	1

Making the recruitment process accessible

To ensure Social Security Scotland's recruitment process is accessible to all, we asked survey respondents and focus group particpants if they had faced any barriers when looking for jobs.

Over half of survey respondents (54 per cent) said they had faced barriers when looking or applying for jobs in the past.

Table 14: Survey respondents who experienced barriers (n=72)

Experience of barriers	%
Experienced barriers	54
Did not experience barriers	46
Total	100

In order to understand and reduce potential barriers to employment, we asked focus group participants and survey respondents to tell us about the barriers they had faced in the past. We also asked participants what Social Security Scotland could do to reduce these barriers as part of it's own recruitment processes.

As part of this, focus group participants were shown a sample job advert that had previously been used to recruit Social Security Scotland staff and were asked their

views on each section. We also asked participants how we could improve the application process as a whole, from initial application through to interviews, and then in more general areas such as employment policy and reasonable adjustments. The key themes from this discussion have been detailed below.

Job Adverts

Participants felt that existing job adverts (including the sample shown) were generally fit for purpose, however frequently missed important details that would make it easier for disabled people or people who are in receipt of social security to apply.

Participants felt that having the right amount and type of information was highly important in making sure they would feel confident in submitting an application. In the sample job advert, participants felt that the introductory section lacked an explicit, up-front statement that applications from particular groups such as people from ethnic minorities and disabled people were welcome. Whilst participants noted that the advert said something to this effect towards the end, they felt that they would be more likely to continue reading if this was made clear up front.

A few participants felt that the introductory section had too much information which made reading the advert laborious. They described it as 'long-winded' and 'unnecessary'. Participants generally felt that adverts should contain all required information whilst still being 'punchy'.

Participants expected the list of job duties to be clear and describe precisely what would be expected of candidates. It was suggested by some that a bullet list was preferable to the paragraphs of text used in the sample advert. A lack of clear information about the duties was seen to be an important accessibility barrier as disabled participants would be unclear as to whether they could do the job and therefore be put off from applying. Some participants felt the advert should state whether there was any flexibility around adjusting the duties of the job to the individual needs of candidates, or whether each candidate would be expected to fulfil all the duties listed. This would give confidence to applicants who could do most, but not all of the duties listed due to their disability.

Participants stated that descriptions about the interview and the recruitment process should be plain English and easy to understand. The sample advert shown to participants encouraged applicants to use the 'STAR' model of responding to interview questions. Whilst some participants understood the concept, others felt this was 'confusing' and 'unclear'. The explanation of the Civil Service Competencies system was said to be 'civil service speak' and 'offputting'. It was felt that more could be done in the sample advert to emphasise that the agency would consider applicants based on flexibility and character rather than solely on experience.

"I've seen adverts that say it's more important to be flexible as opposed to skilled or whatever, where that puts people at their ease if they are not particularly strong in that area. I'm open to training as opposed to qualified".

Participants also idenfied some information that the sample advert was lacking, but that they would find useful when applying. This included:

- Information on when candidates would hear back about the application;
- Easy to find contact details to allow the candidate to request the advert and application materials in a different format;
- An option to receive feedback, or state that feedback cannot be given;
- Inform candidates that reasonable adjustments will be made throughout the process and let candidates know how to inform the recruiter about the required adjustments;
- Being explicit about whether the job can be full time, part time or flexible; and
- Information about how the organisation's policy could impact on accessibility (such as home working policies, reasonable adjustments and annual and medical leave).

The language used in the job advert was also identified as being important in making the advert accessible. On the whole, participants were positive about the language used in the sample advert. They felt words such as 'rapport', 'empathetic' and 'inclusive' were the right kind of words to use and would aid in finding the 'right type of people' for the job. Some participants suggested that whilst the words were fine, some candidates may not understand them and that shorter sentences and simpler words should be used.

The language used in the sample advert detailing the 'minimum expected time in post' and the 'sift process' were usually found to be confusing. Some participants did not understand what was meant by phrases such as 'initial sift' and 'minimum time in post'. Participants who understood the words still had queries about the policy as a whole. Simplifying the language used in these areas would increase the accessibility of future job adverts.

Participants tended to be against using percentages as part of the instructions in adverts. Some participants said the use of numbers in a job advert would make them 'panic'. In the sample advert, percentages were used to suggest to candidates where the majority of time should be spent when answering questions. Most participants felt that a textual explanation of what they should focus on would be more useful and would avoid people being caught out on the numbers.

Accessible application forms and interviews

Participants were asked how the next stages of the application process (the job application form and the interview) could be made accessible. These reflections are based on previous experience, not on experience with Social Security Scotland specifically.

Many participants felt that the default way to apply for jobs was now online, however some said they lacked the confidence to use a computer to apply. Others said they felt the opposite – for example they had asked for an accessible application form when applying for a job online and been told that the accessible

application form was only available in a paper format. This made the application more difficult as writing long answers was not easy for them, whereas applying online meant they could type and edit the application as they went along.

Having a paper and online version available with both being fully accessible would go some way to resolving these issues.

The application form itself was seen to be a barrier by many. Participants gave examples where they found completing application forms difficult. They suggested application forms should be 'clear', 'straight to the point' and 'not too long'. Forms that were long or had too many questions were said to reduce candidates' confidence in their application.

'If it's too long, if there's millions of questions, you just think 'Oh, I'll never get through this!', short and concise to what you're looking for, people will feel more confident where it's clear what you're looking for.'

When attending interviews, some participants felt there was a lack of representation of disabled people on interview panels. It was felt to be 'very important' to have disabled people on panels where they would be highly visible to the candidates. This would, participants said, allow them to feel confident that the organisation was a good place for a disabled person to work.

'Always have someone with a learning disability on the panel.'

Some participants felt that interviews were generally very stressful experiences. They suggested holding interviews in more neutral locations as holding interviews in city centre government offices would make them nervous. Interviews in local locations familiar to the candidates would help make them feel more comfortable.

In terms of applying to Social Security Scotland specifically, participants felt that interviewers should take care not to judge candidates on their appearences.

'A lot of people are on benefits and disabled, they neglect how they look.'

Participants were split on what clothing the interviewers should wear. Some felt they should not dress in overly formal clothing as they would find this 'intimidating'. Other participants felt that interviews justified formal clothing and that they would not have much confidence in the organisation if employees showed up in casual dress.

'If I came along for a job interview and people were wearing a t-shirt and shorts, I'd walk out and say this interview is over.'

Most participants felt the clothing worn should reflect the position being applied for – smart-casual for lower level positions and more formal wear for higher level roles.

Employer policy and reasonable adjustments

Inclusive employment policies and a willingness to make adjustments to accommodate individual needs were identified by some participants as being essential in reducing barriers for disabled people to find work.

The adjustments suggested included:

- Flexible shift patterns or flexible start and finish times, to recognise the changeable nature of disabilities and long term health conditions;
- The ability to take medical leave as required, without being made to 'justify and beg' for time off;
- Making time to understand individual employees' reasonable adjustments as part of the recruitment and induction process;
- Taking into account the childcare and caring needs of employees;
- Flexible working locations, including a policy of allowing employees to work from home to reduce the impact of a commute on disabled employees; and
- Disability-friendly organisational policies and a good understanding of disability throughout the organisation, such as through the provision of disability awareness training to all staff.

Wider factors

Participants highlighted a number of wider factors which were perceived to be barriers to employment, but are also typically outwith the control of a single employer or may not be specific to applying for a job. They are included here in the interest of portraying the full range of barriers faced by disabled applicants.

Participants felt that the social security system as a whole was a major barrier to them seeking employment. The complex nature of how the system interacts with paid employment meant many potential disabled applicants feel confused about whether they would be financially better or worse off taking on paid employment.

'Contradictory policies make people afraid to work or volunteer. Just because you have the ability on a good day to do a couple of hours work doesn't mean you can do full employment and come off the safety net of social security…'

Additionally, reporting changes in their circumstances (such as a new job) to the DWP was perceived as being ardous. Flexible employment policies such as flexi-time or flexible shift working were not helpful if employees were unsure how to report these changing circumstances to the DWP or Social Security Scotland. Offering candidates advice or signposting them to sources of information as to how a job could impact their benefits could assist in alleviating this problem.

'Some people would be really worried about how it would affect your benefits. People will want to know, if it's just one day a week, it there was advice on how it would affect your benefits so you're not penalised.'

Participants also felt there was a general lack of information relating to physical accessibility.

'Some organisations do not include equality policies and monitoring information. One has to be proactive in checking physical access.'

Other wider factors highlighted by participants included:

- Difficulty travelling to jobs when disabled, particularly if living in a rural location;
- Poor or no references from previous employment reducing the likelihood of being offered a job;
- Lack of money to post applications or CVs;
- Lack of money or clothing to attend interviews; and
- Lack of general knowledge as to how recruitment processes work.

Working for the Civil Service

In addition to understanding the general barriers for disabled people seeking employment, we wanted to find out how perceptions of the Civil Service as a whole could impact on people's decision whether or not to apply for a role in Social Security Scotland.

Focus group participants were asked for their perceptions of the Civil Service, both positive and negative, and whether this would influence their decision whether to apply for a Civil Service job.

Perceptions of the Civil Service

Many participants viewed working for the Civil Service positively. They felt the Civil Service was 'well paid', 'a good place to work' and a 'job for life'. They thought the Civil Service offered a 'fantastic pension' and was reasonably flexible in terms of accommodating disabilities. Some participants said they would feel proud if their child or a young relative got a job in the Civil Service.

'They've just come out of university and college. Their parents are so proud and they've got a job in the civil service and they get a fantastic pension…'

Participants who had past experience of working within the Civil Service highlighted positive experiences of their disability or health condition being accommodated:

'I work for an NDPB[10] which is sort of civil service […] a good thing was in terms of my mental health. They did make some effort. How genuine that was I don't know but they did make a decent amount of effort to try and keep me in the organisaiton.'

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[10] Non-departmental public body.

Some participants gave examples of specific times they felt a civil servant had been particularly helpful.

'You do occasionally get the ones who go out of their way [to help], but they tend to be the older, long term protected workers…'

Other participants told us of their negative perceptions of the Civil Service. They used words such as 'wasteful', 'opinionated', 'bureaucratic' and 'inflexible'. When describing Civil Servants themselves, they described them as 'dismissive', 'robotic' and that they act as if they are 'above you, talking down'. Some viewed Civil Servants as 'unreliable', saying they wil call you at a certain time or do things, and then never doing so. One participant felt that 'you only get in if you know someone who works there'.

Participants also described the culture of the civil service as 'target-driven' to the detriment of those who interact with the service itself. The 'target-driven' nature of the service was seen to be particualry problematic for social security, where participants felt it meant calls were cut short, assessments weren't taking as long as they needed to and staff were generally unwilling to give clients the time they needed.

Where do perceptions come from

Participant's perceptions of the Civil Service came from many places: the media, friends and family and their interactions with civil servants themselves. When asked if their perceptions of civil servants differed between government departments, participants tended to say no and instead formed views of the Civil Service as a whole. Some participants made a distinction between the civil service of the UK, Scotland and local authority workers (though some did not). As all participants who took part in this study had experience of the benefits system, it is highly likely that many of the perceptions held by participants stemmed from interactions with the DWP. A small number of participants did identify specific experiences with other departments, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

'My dealings with the DVLA - quite difficult to deal with, [I was] passed from pillar to post…'

Some participants did feel there were differences between Scottish Government civil servants and those from the Westminster departments. Much of these differences appeared to be based on politics or government policy rather than actual experiences with civil servants themselves.

'I think there's a two-pronged civil service – Scottish and Westminster and they're different. Scottish Government is more open and transparent, I don't trust anything from Westminster, there's a big element of trust there.'

For Social Security Scotland specifically, participants said they felt the agency represented a 'fresh start' and was about 'doing things differently'. Relatively few participants had perceptions about the agency or its staff.

When asked if their perceptions would influence their decision as to apply for a Civil Service job in the future, such as with Social Security Scotland, participants were mixed. Many participants had not considered the Civil Service as a potential employer. Some participants said their perceptions would motivate them to apply for a job so that they could have a positive influence on the culture of the service:

'Yes, to sort it out. I want to be there to change it.'

For others, the positive aspects of a Civil Service career (such as pensions or job flexibility) meant they would also be interested in applying for future jobs.

However for many participants, other factors such as accessible recruitment methods, flexible employment practices and a disability positive organisational culture was of greater importance when considering the Civil Service as an employer.

What's Next?

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Experience Panels in the development of Scotland's new social security system. This will include further research on individual benefits in addition to cross-cutting work to assist in the development of Social Security Scotland.

The results of this research will be carefully considered and used to inform and improve how future rounds of Social Security Scotland recruitment are delivered, ensuring the process of applying for a job within the agency is accessible to everyone.

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