

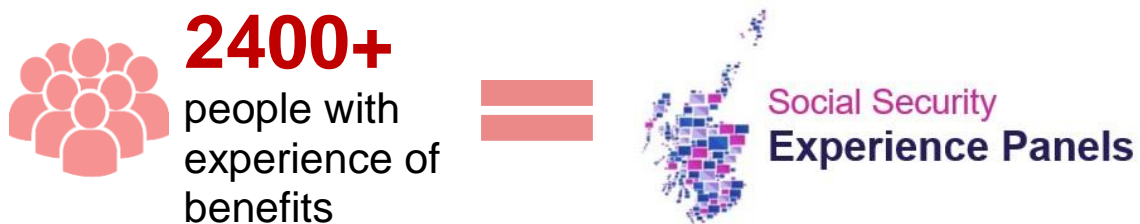
Social Security Experience Panels: Social Security Scotland Staff

Background

The Scottish Government are becoming responsible for some of the benefits currently delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).



To prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the **Social Security Experience Panels**.



Experience Panel members all have experience of **claiming at least one of the benefits being devolved to Scotland**.

The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design Scotland's new social security system.

About the research

This report gives the findings of the 'Communicating with Social Security Scotland by phone and paper' research.

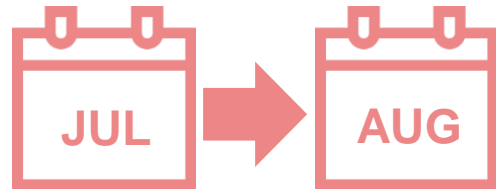


2,456
invites



15
focus
groups

The research took place in

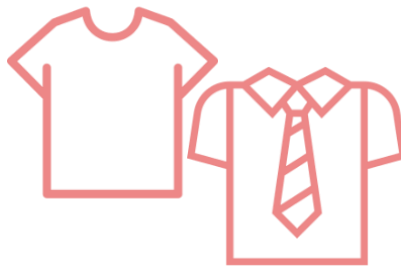


2018

The research explored:



What Social Security
Scotland staff should
be like



What they should
look like



How staff can meet
the expectations of
clients

30+

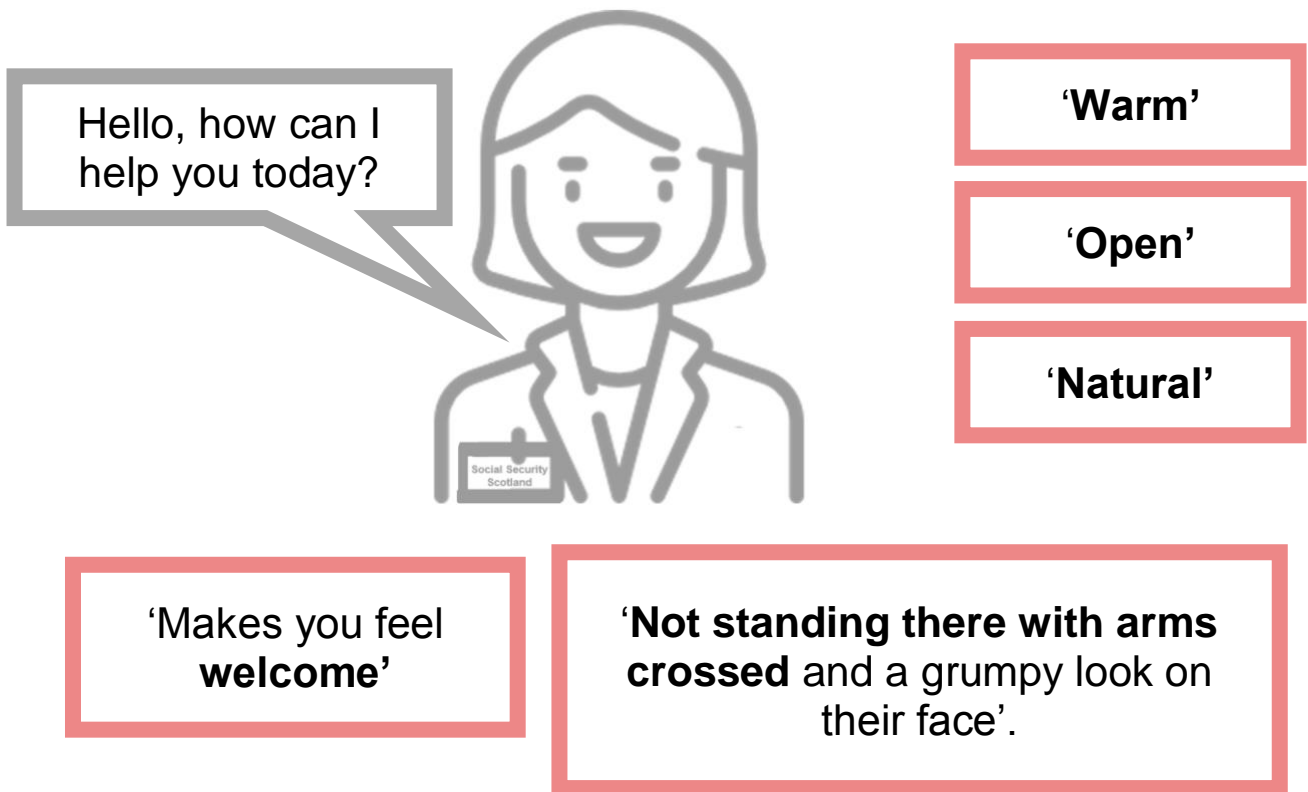
participants took part



7
locations

What should staff look like?

We asked participants to **describe what their ideal Social Security Scotland staff member would look like**. They told us staff should be **warm, friendly and approachable**.



Participants told us that **positive body language was important** – crossed arms or looking unhappy were given as examples of what staff shouldn't be like.



Participants had different opinions on **what staff should wear**. We heard that wearing clothing that was too formal, such as shirts and ties, could be 'intimidating' to some clients.

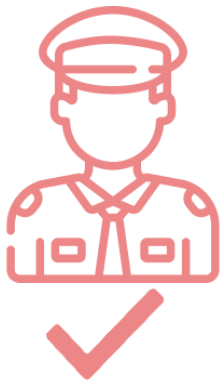


Other participants felt that **wearing clothing that was too casual, such as t-shirts or shorts was inappropriate** and would make them feel the agency was less professional.



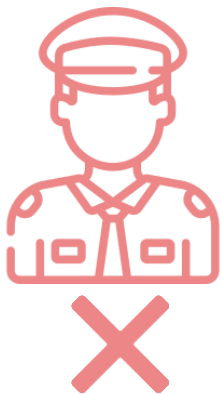
Most participants wanted clothing that was **appropriate to the role** and was **not too formal and not too casual**. In practice, this could be a shirt without a tie, or a polo shirt with work trousers.

Some participants **thought that staff should wear a uniform**. They felt that it would make staff **easier to identify** and portray a **'consistent', 'professional'** and **'accessible'** image. Others did not want a uniform, saying it was **unnecessary** and that **they didn't want to be identified talking to agency staff**.



Portrays a **'professional'** and **'consistent'** image.

Easy to **identify agency staff**.



Could be **'off putting'** and **'too formal'**.

Not really needed to inspire confidence – for example, **doctors don't wear uniforms**.

'I don't want staff to be easily identifiable'.



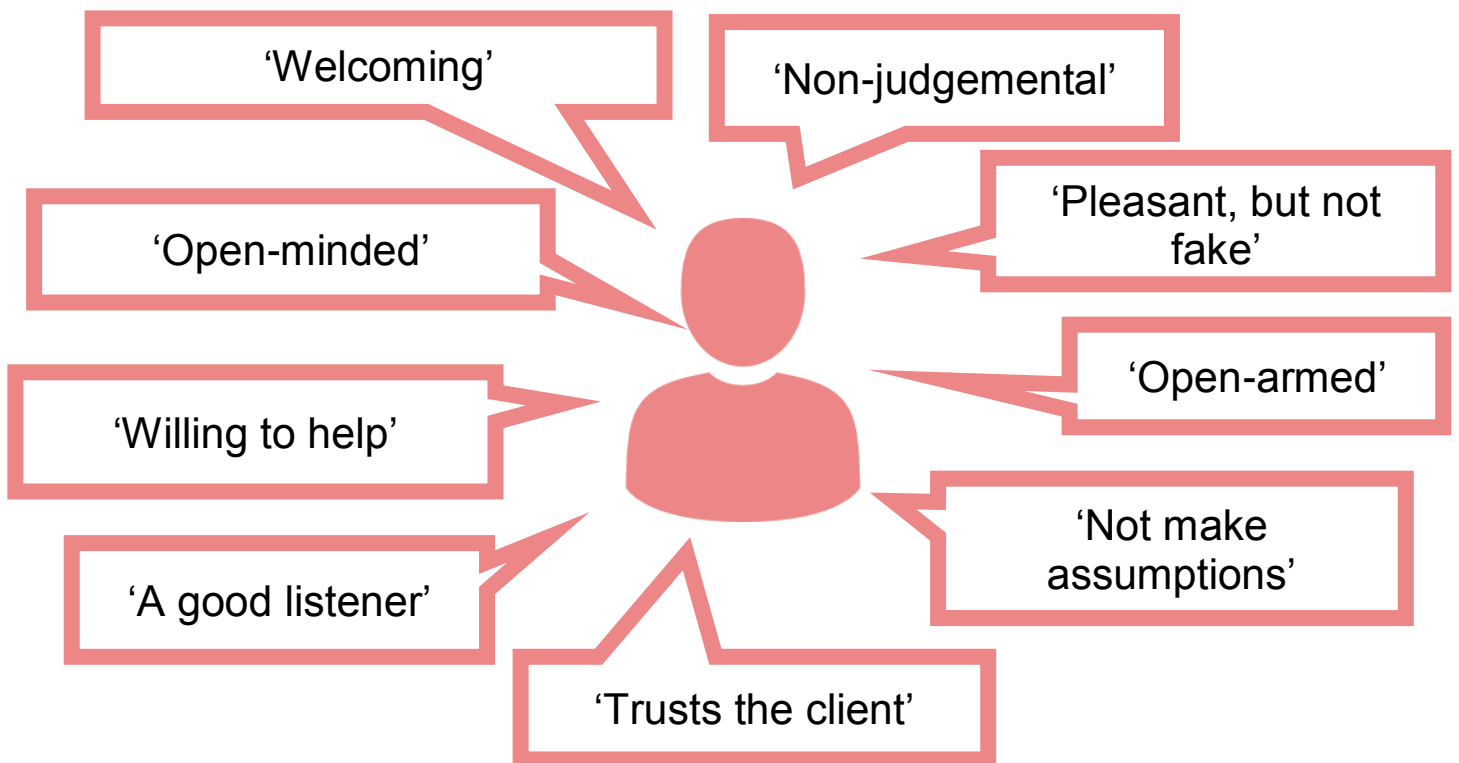
Participants suggested that **staff display name badges or lanyards instead of a uniform**. This would make it easy to identify specific staff members and also make them look more **'approachable'**.

What should staff act like?

Most participants could think of a time when they felt they had been treated poorly by DWP staff.

‘Whenever I’ve had to deal with people at the benefits agency – you sometimes feel that they’re paying your benefits out their own pocket – it’s their attitude.’

Participants told us what they thought **staff should act like**:



These traits were called **‘soft skills’** by some participants. ‘Soft skills’ also included things such as **managing client expectations, having a good understanding of what it’s like to claim benefits and knowing how to treat people with disabilities.**

What should staff know?



Participants felt that staff should be '**knowledgeable**', '**well-informed**' and '**competent**'.

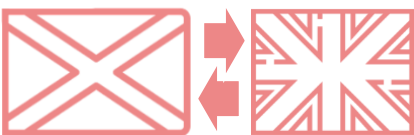
Participants had different expectations for what staff should know, however most participants expected staff to have a good general knowledge of the social security system, whilst knowing where to find information to answer more specific queries.

'I would not expect them to know every regulation word for word...'

Some participants thought it was particularly important that staff be **consistent** in what they told clients.

'I think it needs to be consistent – no matter who you talk to, it needs to be the same information you get.'

Other important areas of staff knowledge mentioned were:



How Scottish and UK benefits interact



Support networks available to clients



Human rights

Participants told us two other things they felt it was important staff know.

Many participants said it was important that **staff understand what it was like to claim benefits as a client.**

‘[It can be] quite a degrading experience, so it has to be supportive and understanding.’

‘Understanding that three weeks means nothing to the person behind the counter, but it might be a very long time for the client.’

‘When you’re claiming benefits, it feels that people own you and you’ve lost your freedom...’



Finally, participants **expected staff to have a good understanding of disabilities, and how they can affect someone.**



We heard that it was **important for staff to be well trained in disability awareness** and how to **put clients at ease.**

‘Staff should be aware of who they are meeting and if they have needs...’

How do staff achieve these standards?

Participants told us **how they thought staff could meet their expectations:**



Good staff training



Good staff knowledge



A positive working culture



Not target-driven



Supportive colleagues



Sufficient staffing to avoid burnout



Giving clients choices



Showing clients what you are writing about them



An understanding of client's experiences

Ultimately, participants felt that a **disability-positive** culture combined with **good staff training and support** was key to allowing the agency to meet their expectations.

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.

This research will be used in future rounds of Social Security Scotland recruitment, informing the agency of client expectations for staff.



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