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Social Security Experience Panels: Social Security Scotland Staff



EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY



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Introduction

In July and August 2018, the Scottish Government carried out focus groups with Experience Panel members to understand their views on what Social Security Scotland staff should be like, how they should act and what they should know. 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

Social Security Scotland staff

Participants were asked about what they would like Social Security Scotland staff to be like.

Participants felt that staff should look 'friendly and approachable'. When broken down, this term included staff clothing which struck a balance between formal and casual, positive body language and facial expressions and how they talked to clients. Participants used words such as 'open', 'natural' and 'warm' when describing their ideal staff member.

Participants told us that staff should be dressed in a 'appropriate' and 'presentable' manner. In practice, this meant different things to different participants. For some, it meant 'smart casual clothing' of a polo shirt and work trousers. To others, it meant more formal clothing such as an open-collared shirt. Some participants felt that 'overly-formal' clothing, such as suits could make them feel 'intimidated' or 'nervous' however for others, formal clothing projected a 'professional' and competent image of the agency. In general, participants felt that the clothing should be appropriate to the situation – not too formal and not too casual.

Participants tended to not want staff to wear uniforms, pointing out that they were not necessary to gain clients trust. At worst, uniforms could make some clients reluctant to interact with agency staff in shared buildings as they wouldn't want anyone to identify who they were talking to.

Most participants could recall a time when they had felt the attitudes of staff within DWP to be poor. They expected Social Security Scotland staff to be 'open-armed', 'non-judgemental' and be 'willing to help'. They did not want staff to make assumptions about them, and felt that the default position of staff should be one of trust.

Staff would ideally be 'knowledgeable' and 'well-informed' about the services they provide, with clients receiving consistent answers to questions no matter who they ask. Some participants felt that staff should have a wider knowledge base, including on the human rights of clients and on the way devolved and reserved benefits interacted.

Participants also felt that knowledge and understanding of the client's experience of claiming social security was critical in getting staff to be supportive. Participants wanted Social Security Scotland staff to recognise and understand that claiming benefits could be 'degrading' and that many clients were at a difficult point in their lives. Participants wanted staff to recognise the stress and anxiety many clients were feeling, and to try and be reassuring and patient.

Finally, participants felt that staff should have a good knowledge of disabilities and how they could impact an individual's life. Participants felt it would be useful if staff knew about their client's accessibility needs before they met them.

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. Over 2,400 people from across Scotland who have recent experience of at least one of the benefits being devolved to Scotland have registered to be Experience Panels members.

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 what agency staff should be like.

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

- Expectations around how agency staff should look and act, and their knowledge and character; and
- Participant's views on how we could ensure their expectations around staff members are met.

Participants were recruited from the Scottish Government Experience Panels (2,456 people). All Experience Panel members were invited to take part in the focus groups.

Flipcharts and post-it notes were used to facilitate discussion and capture the views of all participants. A visual approach was used in the staff focus groups, with facilitators using a simple drawing of a person to focus discussion on how staff members should look, sound, know and behave.

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.

Social Security Scotland staff

Focus group participants were asked to describe what their ideal Social Security Scotland staff member would look and act like, what they would know and how they would interact with clients.

What should Social Security Staff look like

Participants felt that staff should look ‘friendly and approachable’. When this term was explored further, participants said it included what staff were wearing, their facial expressions and their body language. These factors combined would contribute to making clients ‘feel at ease’ when visiting agency offices and speaking to staff.

Participants also used words such as ‘open’, ‘natural’ and ‘warm’ when describing how staff should look. Negative body language, such as crossed arms or looking unhappy or impatient were listed as examples of what staff shouldn’t look like.

‘Not standing there with arms crossed and a grumpy look on their face. Doesn’t have to be a smile, just not closed off.’

Figure 1: Consolidation of visual output from focus group sessions – the ‘ideal’ staff member



Identity and uniforms

Many participants told us that the clothing worn by staff influenced their perception of the quality and competence of the service provided by the agency. Most participants felt staff should be dressed in an 'appropriate' and 'presentable' manner, with a balance between formal and casual, however there was less consensus on what this meant in practice.

'Smart casual clothing' according to participants typically included polo shirts, black work trousers and open collar shirts, but not suits or ties. Smart casual was seen by some to be more 'approachable' and 'less-intimidating' than more formal clothing.

'Smart casual is fine, but people have the assumption that those who wear a suit will behave like they are above the clients.'

There was also a concern amongst some participants that overly-formal clothing could make some clients reluctant to visit agency buildings and interact with staff as they could be 'intimidated' or 'feel nervous'.

'Shirts and ties would intimidate people, would avoid that.'

For these participants, it was important that staff members look like 'ordinary people'.

'Something that makes them look like ordinary people. Need to make sure they're not hard to talk to...'

This view was not shared by all participants. Some felt that more formal clothing projected a more positive image about the agency itself. To these participants, wearing less formal clothing was a sign that the service overall would be poor.

'Very casual clothing' defined by participants as including jeans and sandals was rarely seen to be appropriate. Some said they would feel the service was 'less professional' if staff wore t-shirts or jeans.

'Staff shouldn't wear jeans and t-shirts...'

Participants had mixed views about how to identify staff members, and whether they should wear uniforms. Some said that uniforms could be 'useful for accessibility' and make it easy to identify a staff member when at an agency building. This may be particularly valuable in cases where the agency shares a building with another organisation. For others, a uniform was a way of portraying a 'consistent', 'professional' and 'accessible' image.

Participants who favoured a uniform felt it should be relatively 'casual' – for example, an embroidered polo shirt with an agency logo. Anything more formal was seen to be a risk of 'putting people off'.

Participants who did not want a uniform pointed out that uniforms were not necessary in order to portray an image of professionalism and to inspire confidence in service providers.

‘Doctors don’t wear uniforms and clients are happy to see doctors. It’s not about what they wear, it’s about how they talk and listen to them.’

Being able to easily identify agency staff was also not seen to be universally positive, as some participants did not want others to see the uniform and know who they were talking to.

‘Privacy is important and uniforms would detract from this as people would know you were speaking to an ‘official’.

This was particularly problematic if speaking to an agency staff member in a public building.

‘If based in a library a uniform will not be okay, as everyone can identify why you are there and know who you are talking to.’

Some participants felt a uniform could be ‘impersonal’ and ‘too full on’. They raised concerns that disabled staff members may not find uniforms comfortable to work in.

Participants were asked how staff should be identified if uniforms were not worn. Some participants suggested name badges and lanyards. One participant said that a badge with a first name would help make staff feel more ‘approachable’.

Staff attitudes and behaviour

Most participants could recall times where they felt the attitudes of staff within DWP had been poor.

‘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 said staff should have a ‘welcoming’, ‘open-armed’, ‘non-judgemental’ attitude and be ‘willing to help’. Staff should avoid making assumptions about clients based on initial appearances.

‘For example, if someone is shabbily dressed, you might automatically assume they are homeless, or if someone is in a suit that they are well off...’

For some participants, not making assumptions was closely linked to the idea of trust. It was felt that staff’s default position should be to trust clients rather than assume they are being dishonest.

‘Don’t pre-judge or make assumptions on the client, situation or medical condition. Don’t assume the client is lying.’

Participants also felt that staff should be ‘genuine’ and ‘authentic’ towards clients.

‘They should be pleasant, but not ‘fake’ – remember, this is not a pleasant visit for the client.’

These traits were termed ‘soft skills’ by some participants. ‘Soft skills’ also included things such as adjusting body language to the situation and managing client expectations of the service they would receive.

Staff knowledge of social security

Having staff who are ‘knowledgeable’, ‘well-informed’ and ‘competent’ was important for many participants.

When asked their expectations for staff knowledge, participant views differed slightly however their expectations tended to include a broad basic knowledge of the social security system, with the ability to seek answers to more specific queries if required by the client.

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

A often mentioned point was the need for staff knowledge to be consistent. Some participants could recall being told different things by different members of staff.

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

Participants expected staff to have knowledge beyond understanding their own social security policy. For example, one participant suggested staff should understand the rights of clients under Scottish law.

‘One thing they certainly need to have an understanding of [is] people’s rights, particularly human rights. Rights to social security are guaranteed by the UN, but everybody has human rights and they have to be aware that human rights apply specifically in certain circumstances.’

Participants also felt knowledge of the interaction between Scottish and UK-wide benefits could be important.

‘If they are an advisor they need to be knowledgeable with some of the retained benefits as you have people who are crossing over.’

Other participants suggested that wider knowledge of the support networks and services available would be useful so that clients could be referred to these organisations if required.

In addition to being knowledgeable, participants felt it was important that staff managed client expectations as they wouldn't be able to solve every problem a client had.

'Whilst it's important to inspire confidence, staff should be wary of promising that they can solve everything. You need to strike a balance...'

Understanding the client experience

It was felt that agency staff should have a well-rounded understanding of what it was like to claim social security and interact with the social security system. This knowledge would, participants said, help staff understand things from a client's point of view.

'[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, control what you can and cannot do.'

Participants felt that agency staff should recognise and understand the impact of claiming benefits on clients and how 'stressful' and 'anxiety-inducing' it can be. They also wanted staff to understand that a client's interaction with the agency often comes at a time in their lives where there has been an extreme and abrupt change in their circumstances.

As personal circumstances can be different for every client, some participants said it was important that staff do not have an attitude of 'we know what you're like' or 'we know what people who live in your postal area are like'.

Participants felt that staff should acknowledge and recognise the stress placed on clients and take this into account when talking to them.

'Acknowledge it. [...] Don't be condescending. Keep reassuring. Don't add fuel to the fire.'

Understanding disability

Staff having a good understanding of disability was highlighted by many participants as being very important.

‘Staff [should be] very well trained in disability awareness, on how to guide you as it can affect your mood if not done appropriately. Full disability awareness training.’

Understanding disability was felt to be important in putting clients at ease as soon as they entered the building. Understanding a client’s specific needs before meeting them was seen as valuable.

‘Staff should be aware of who they are meeting and if they have needs, for example if they have anxiety, heart attack, wheelchair, so they know.’

How agency staff achieve these standards

Participants made a number of suggestions as to how staff could best meet their expectations for behaviour and knowledge. Many of these suggestions related to agency culture and how staff were treated.

Some participants felt that it was important to create a ‘good working culture’ for staff, combined with effective management and good support structures. They felt that part of the working culture of the agency should be the ability to share information with, and get support from colleagues.

‘They need to feel like they can talk to their other colleagues to get information.’

‘...if you do a long assessment, and it takes a few hours, you need to be able to come back to the office and talk to your team about it as it can be emotionally draining on both sides...’

Some participants also felt that developing and maintaining high standards was important.

‘You need to ensure standards are upheld and staff are accountable – use the standards that exist and have processes such as supervision on home visits.’

However many participants advised against making staff focused on targets. It was felt by some that being ‘target-driven’ would lead to an inferior experience for clients and result in staff feeling ‘pressured’.

‘I think I have a concern if staff are target driven on the amount of claims they do a day – you have someone you could do quickly but someone else might need hours.’

‘And it shouldn’t be a competition about how many people you assess – it says nothing about how well you do it.’

Other participants made specific suggestions about how staff could embody the suggestions around their behaviour, such as showing clients what they have written on the screen.

‘Showing clients what you are doing on the screen is helpful [...] clients want to see what you are doing for them as there is no secrecy, total transparency...’

Some participants wanted staff to help them move around the building before and after their appointment:

‘After an appointment, staff should say on your way out turn left and down the corridor, etc.’

Other suggestions included:

- Setting client expectations about the appointment in advance, and stating what will happen if there isn’t enough time to cover everything;
- Respecting client privacy when speaking to them in public areas;
- Give clients time if they are upset;
- Giving clients choices (for example, in how they addressed them); and
- Having sufficient levels of staffing to avoid staff burnout.

Ultimately, participants felt that a disability-positive organisational culture combined with good staff training and behaviour would go some way to allowing staff and 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 to inform Social Security Scotland recruitment, ensuring the agency is aware of client expectations for staff.



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