



Social Security Experience Panels: Information About Your Application and Accessing Support From Other Services



EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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Background

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits currently delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). As part of the work to prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels. Over 2,400 people who have recent experience of at least one of the benefits that will be devolved to Scotland registered to join the Experience Panels. The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design a new social security system that works for the people of Scotland.

Panel members were invited to take part in a series of surveys and focus groups to help inform the Scottish Government's approach to setting up the new social security agency, Social Security Scotland. This report covers the analysis of one of these surveys, which was carried out in July and August 2018. It also includes analysis of five focus groups which took place in August 2018.

Participants were asked how Social Security Scotland should keep people up to date with information about their application. They were also asked what sort of support people would want Social Security Scotland to tell them about, as well as how Social Security Scotland can make it simple for people to access other support and services that may be relevant to them.

Summary

Panel members were asked about how they would want to receive information and updates about their application. Respondents highlighted the importance of offering a choice of communication channels, and that their preferred method of communication may depend both on their own circumstance on any day, and also on the topic of communication. For example, many respondents said they would prefer a form of written communication for information about decisions on their application, but may be more comfortable with other channels for more general updates about the progress of their application.

Many participants said that they would be likely to use online sources including the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) website, Citizens Advice Scotland website, or a search engine, to get information about the type of support that might be available to them. Others highlighted sources like advice services, third sector organisations, and health and social care services which may be contactable in person or over the phone.

Most participants said that they would want Social Security Scotland to tell them if there were other benefits or types of support that might be available to them from another organisation. In particular participants wanted to be told about other benefits, for example those delivered by DWP or local authorities, that might be available, other types of financial help they might be able to apply for, as well as information about wider entitlements such as the blue badge scheme, home energy support, and advocacy services. Participants were more divided on whether it would be valuable to provide information about other types of financial or debt advice, with some feeling that it could be helpful to share this information in a non-judgemental way, and others feeling that it could be stigmatising to do so.

Some respondents felt that they would want to be simply provided with this type of information, and be allowed to take any next steps themselves. Respondents who felt that way felt that it gave them control of the process and allowed them to make their own decisions. Others felt that they would prefer Social Security Scotland to take a more proactive role in referring them on to another service – through either actively supporting them to contact the organisation, or sharing their details with another organisation to contact them directly. Respondents said that this would help to make sure that they were supported to access the support that they needed.

Most respondents felt that they would want to hear information about other support available when they first contacted Social Security Scotland. This included through information leaflets or information online, or through an interactive form that could make suggestions. Others preferred getting information through a conversation with a staff member, either face-to-face, over the phone, or, in some cases, through web chat.

About the research

This report details the key themes which emerged from a survey and five focus groups. The research considered people's experience of accessing information and support in the current social security system, and their priorities for how the information and support should be made available through the new social security system. Focus group participants and survey respondents were recruited from the Scottish Government Social Security Experience Panels.

All Experience Panel members were invited to participate in a series of surveys and focus groups. The focus groups were held in 18 locations across Scotland during August 2018. Topics were assigned to focus groups based on the priorities identified by those registered. Five focus groups discussed information and support in the context of applying for a benefit, and one of the surveys focussed on information and support.

The survey was available online, or could be completed on paper or over the freephone helpline. 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 survey respondents and focus group participants only, and are not indicative of the wider Scottish population. Percentages are given only to give a broad sense of the balance of opinion across respondents.

About the survey respondents

Participation in Experience Panels research is optional, and in this case 227 people chose to complete the survey, which is around 9 per cent of all Experience Panels members. The information was added to information from the "About Your Benefits and You" (Scottish Government, 2017) and "Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far" (Scottish Government, 2018) surveys. Where possible, the data collected in these surveys was linked to the information supplied by respondents of these surveys as part of the longitudinal dataset for this project. Some responses could not be linked in this way. This was due to either missing or unclear contact information in their

survey response or the respondent not having previously completed the relevant demographic information.

11 per cent of respondents to this survey were aged 25-44. 39 per cent were aged 45-59 and 31 per cent were aged 60-79. We did not hold data on the age of 19 per cent of respondents to this survey.

52 per cent of respondents to this survey identify as a “woman/girl” and 30 per cent as a “man/boy”. We did not hold data about the gender of 19 per cent of respondents to this survey.

50 per cent of respondents said they have a disability or long term health condition, 32 per cent said that they did not, and we did not hold information about this for 18 per cent of respondents. 34 per cent said that they have caring responsibilities, 45 per cent said that they did not, and we did not hold this information for 20 per cent of respondents.

Focus groups on this topic were held in Galashiels, Dundee, Cumbernauld, Castle Douglas and Aberdeen.

Accessing information and support about your application

Receiving information about your application

Survey respondents were asked about how they would want to receive information at different stages in the application process, in relation to the progress of their application.

They were asked how important it is to choose to have different ways to be contacted at each stage. Nine in ten (91 per cent) survey respondents said that this was very important or important. Four per cent were unsure and five per cent said that it was not that important or not important at all.

Respondents were also asked about how they would like to be contacted by Social Security Scotland at each stage of the application process.

This included telling them that the application had been received; that it had started to be processed; the status of the application; that a decision has been made; and to let them know that more information is required to support the claim and that the agency will be in contact.

Across all stages of the application process, email was the most popular communication choice. More than two thirds (68 per cent) of respondents would want to receive an email to let them know that their application had been received. Almost a third would want to receive an email to be informed that their application had started to be processed (63 per cent) and to hear the status of their application (62 per cent).

Three in five (61 per cent) would want an email to hear that a decision had been made on their application and to hear that more information is required to support their claim. For these stages of the process, letter was also a popular choice, with three in five (61 per cent) respondents saying they would like a letter to tell them that a decision had been

made, and half (50 per cent) saying they would like a letter to let them know that further information is required to support their claim.

There were slight differences in respondents' communication preferences depending on the stage of the application process. For example, three in five (61 per cent) would like to be informed that a decision had been made by letter, whereas just a third (34 per cent) would want a letter to inform them that Social Security Scotland had started to process their application.

Table 1 illustrates these preferences in more detail.

	To tell you that we have received your application	To tell you that we have started to process your application	To tell you the status of your application	To tell you that a decision has been made	Telling you that further information is required to support the claim and that the agency will be in contact
Email	68%	63%	62%	61%	61%
SMS/ text message	46%	40%	36%	33%	36%
By post	41%	34%	36%	61%	50%
Online	28%	26%	27%	30%	29%
Telephone	23%	22%	21%	31%	37%
In person	7%	7%	7%	11%	11%
Textphone	5%	5%	4%	5%	4%
Typetalk	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Don't know	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Table 1 (n=225): At each stage of the application process, how would you like Social Security Scotland to contact you (please tick all that you would feel happy with)?

The importance of choice of communication channel throughout the application process was echoed by focus group participants. A number of participants highlighted the importance of not assuming that clients are able to use online channels, or are able to easily print information themselves.

The value of having an option to get information using a Freephone number was highlighted by a number of participants.

“A human being with good knowledge on the end of the phone is going to be more helpful, especially for disabled people or people with disabled children who need your attention.” Focus Group Participant

“A free phone number and Freephone mobiles phone numbers are imperative. We live in a world where we assume everyone has wifi and a level of connectivity- not everyone does. I know folk say you can go to the library to use a computer but people don't want to sit in a library and fill in these forms. A free phone number means everyone can access the service.” Focus Group Participant

Others highlighted that some people also face barriers to using phone services, including the cost, anxiety associated with speaking on the phone, barriers associated to their disability or health condition, and wishing to have a written record of communication which is not possible over the phone.

Accessing information and support about other services

Finding out what support might be available

More than three in five (62 per cent) survey respondents said that they would currently look for information on what benefits and support might be available on the Department for Work and Pensions website. Half (49 per cent) said that they would use an internet search engine, and two in five (40 per cent) said that they would use the Citizens Advice Scotland website. Almost two in five (38 per cent) also said that they would use an advice service like Citizens Advice Scotland by phone, email or in person.

Table 2 illustrates where respondents would currently go to get information on what benefits and other support might be available to them.

Table 2 (n=220)

Where would you currently look to get information on what benefits and other support might be available?	
The Department for Work and Pensions website	62%
Through an internet search engine	49%
Citizens Advice Scotland website	40%
Using an advice service like Citizens Advice Scotland by phone, email or in person	38%
From your local authority, social work or housing association	33%
Through my local Welfare Rights Office by phone, email or in person	32%

From friends or family	32%
From a healthcare professional	23%
From my local carers' centre	22%
From another charity	21%
Another way	18%

Among those who said they would look for information “another way”, this included advocacy services or support workers. Some also suggest local services like libraries, schools and supermarket information boards.

Focus group participants were asked about how they currently access information about the type of support that might be available to them.

A number of participants cited online sources, including using a search engine or the DWP’s website.

“[I would use] the DWP website but it’s quite complicated - you’ve got to find out yourself what’s specific to you. I find they don’t tell you what you’re entitled to - you’ve got to go and find out yourself. They tell you “you may or may not be entitled to something” - it takes a long time because you’ve got to speak to someone to ask what to apply for, then you’ve got to apply, it takes a long time.” Focus Group Participant

Other online sources of information mentioned included websites which specialise in benefits advice – some of which require registration fees to join.

Respondents also spoke about the support on offer through Citizen’s Advice Scotland and other similar support services. Many felt that the support on offer was valuable, but some also suggested that these services are overstretched, or that the frontline volunteers do not always have enough knowledge to be able to resolve issues, and are therefore unable to offer the level of services needed by some clients.

“I’ve found Citizen’s Advice, although can be very helpful, they are sometimes limited because the person is not trained up on everything. So you can go there and you need to go back and back again as they have to seek advice for somebody higher up.” Focus Group Participant

“Well traditional route is CAB, and they’re generally on top of what’s happening but they’re swamped.” Focus Group Participant

A number of respondents spoke about the information and support available through local councils, including through Welfare Advice services. Some had found these services very comprehensive. Others said that the service was more limited, or that they had been simply told to look online.

Other sources of support included health service providers, carers services and third sector organisations, particularly those who specialise in certain health conditions. Some respondents raised concerns that these types of third sector services are facing cuts to their funding which is impacting on the availability of good quality support and advice.

A number of respondents also spoke about getting support or advice from family and friends, and highlighted this as a valuable source of information on what might be available. Some were concerned that this creates system where people being informed about their eligibility is based on “luck” of knowing someone who can help them.

Some participants also suggested that proactive advertising of the type of support that might be available would be useful.

“Leaflets in libraries, health centres, public interest places – being considerate of accessibility. Make sure clear advertising is on TV and radio. There’s nothing wrong with telling people that help exists via national press.” Focus Group Participant

Access to other types of support outside of Social Security Scotland

More than nine in ten (93 per cent) survey respondents said that they would want Social Security Scotland to tell them if there were other benefits or types of support that might be available to them from another organisation (n=226). Almost one in ten (8 per cent) respondents said that they might want to be told or that it would depend on the type of support.

Respondents were most likely to want to hear information about other types of benefits or financial support that they might be able to apply for. More than nine in ten (94 per cent) respondents said that they would want Social Security Scotland to tell them about other benefits that might be relevant to them delivered by DWP or local authorities. Almost three quarters (73 per cent) of respondents would want to hear about other types of financial help that they might be able to apply for (e.g. grants). However, they were less likely to want to hear about money and advice services – a third would want to hear about debt advice services (33 per cent) and credit unions (34 per cent).

Table 3 illustrates the types of services that respondents would want to hear about from Social Security Scotland.

Table 3 (n=227)

Which of the following other services would you want to hear about from Social Security Scotland if we thought they might be relevant to you? (tick all that apply)	
Other benefits, delivered by DWP or local authorities	94%
Other types of financial help that you might be able to apply for (e.g. grants)	73%
A blue badge	64%

Home energy support (for help with heating, electricity and gas)	64%
Advocacy services	56%
Counselling services	47%
Other money advice services	45%
Credit unions	34%
Debt advice	33%
Something else (please write in)	20%

Among those who said “other money advice services”, suggestions included having comprehensive advice about their entitlements, advice about crisis or budgeting loans, advice about transport and advice about medical support or services.

Those who suggested “something else” spoke about wanting advice on travel assistance, support for claiming or completing applications, care or housing services, or holistic advice about everything they may be entitled to.

Many focus group participants felt that they would want information to be provided about all relevant support that could be valuable to them.

Others, however, were more unsure about information being provided about financial or debt advice, or felt that it should only be provided on request. This was due to concern about potential stigma, or the perception that applying for a benefit might imply you weren’t capable of managing your own finances.

“If someone asks but not generally - the idea that you can’t handle your money because you’re disabled doesn’t sit well with me.” Focus Group Participant

“If staff got the sense that client was at a crisis point, they may then ask some sensitive questions around whether they need help immediately, and can signpost them to other places, but not something that happens as standard.” Focus Group Participant

Some felt that it could be useful to provide this sort of information, but that it should be done very sensitively without assumptions.

“There’s nothing wrong with offering. It’s just a service to offer - it’s not wrong to assume people might have difficulties with mortgage payments after they have lost their job for example.” Focus Group Participant

“Signposting to debt and poverty advice would be really helpful. You have to be wary of being seen to be making judgement on people... say ‘we’re not making a judgment here’, make info available universally... there if you might need it.” Focus Group Participant

Some respondents spoke about the need for more holistic support, beyond simply advice relating to benefits or income. This included advice on where they could get support relevant to their health condition, domestic abuse or counselling services. Others suggested that support or advice relating to work, housing and transport would be valuable.

“I want to hear what financial help is available to close relatives who want or need to be with a patient who is admitted to a hospital to die. Fares, accommodation, subsistence is required for several days by rural folk. Otherwise their relative dies alone - which is common but shouldn't be!” Survey Respondent

“Any help or support for those with mental health problems, e.g. depression” Survey Respondent

“If there is a peer support network available that would be good. It is often better for someone who is in the exact same position i.e. a blow knee amputee speaking to someone else who has an amputation and has been through the process. A peer supporter can often sign post to the right agency and this is often less daunting than a "social security" person.” Survey Respondent

How to support people to access other types of support

Two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents said that if Social Security Scotland thought that advice or support from another organisation might be relevant to them, they would want to be given the contact details for that organisation. Half (49 per cent) would want to be supported to contact that organisation, and more than two in five (45 per cent) said that they would want Social Security Scotland to share their details with that organisation so that they can be contacted directly.

Table 2 (n=222)

If Social Security Scotland thought that advice or support from another organisation might be relevant to you, how would you want us to help you access that support?	
Give me the contact details for that organisation	66%
Support me to contact that organisation	49%
Share my details with that organisation so that they can contact me directly and let me know	45%
In another way	5%

Among those who said that they would want help to access that support “another way”, this included people who said they would not want their details to be shared, who would want the support to be directed through their appointee or support worker, or by providing the information publicly such as through a website or leaflet.

A number of participants across both the survey and focus groups felt that it would be useful to simply provide information in a format that people could consider themselves. This was felt to be an advantage as it could equip them with the knowledge to make their own decisions about next steps, and remain in control of the process.

“I would like the information given to me, then leave it up to me to apply.” Focus Group Participant

Some felt that simply being given the information about everything that might be available would be enough, whereas others preferred a more targeted approach to signposting.

“It would be really helpful if there was a single webpage and leaflet (for those not online) that sets out all the benefits and support available to those with disabilities and long term illnesses. After 5 years I'm still randomly finding out about services and benefits. It's really hard to find out what someone is eligible for. I'm a carer and work myself in a bureaucratic job. If I struggle to suss what's available, I wonder how others less able manage. Particularly if they have no carer themselves. There's need to be a one stop for sign posting folk to the right places.” Survey Respondent

“My suggestion is if you wanted you could have a disability book like a baby book which would signpost all the consultants and when you go into hospital you would go “there you are” instead of saying it all again.” Focus Group Participant

“When you apply for one benefit then you should be informed immediately of any other benefits you might be entitled to and be given the relevant application forms to apply.” Survey Respondent

Others felt that a system through which they could be referred to other services, or supported to apply, could be valuable.

“Telling me that something exists, but leaving me completely unsupported in applying for or accessing applications for these things would only make matters worse. Having it as 'you can apply for the blue badge, we can help you with that/here is the form/here are the people who can help you with that' means it would not just be another burden on me.” Survey Respondent

“Not sure I'd trust they'd be in touch. It'd be helpful to have someone to help with the first phone call as the amount of questions they ask you can be overwhelming.” Focus Group Participant

“Making people feel supported and not on their own - rather than “here's the number”, staff could make the phone call for them.” Focus Group Participant

A key point raised by a number of participants, was that this type of referral should only be done with the client's permission.

A number of participants suggested that Social Security Scotland could offer a “one stop shop” for information about the type of support available to people.

“Yes - one of the problems at the moment is that everything is in silos - once you are granted a benefit no one is saying “actually what else are you entitled to?” There should be a general benefit check offered” Focus Group Participant

“I think because you are starting from grassroots level, why can’t we have agency people turn up to that gives all the help you need, that they deal with it all. As opposed to having a scattered...” Focus Group Participant

When to provide information and advice

Half of survey respondents said that they would want to hear about other support that might be available when they first contact Social Security Scotland. More than a quarter said that they would want to hear about this once they had made an application.

Table 3 (n=220)

At what point would you want Social Security Scotland to tell you about other support that might be available?	
When I first contact them	50%
Once I have made an application	27%
When I have a successful application for a benefit	14%
Another time	5%
Only if I request it	5%

Those who said they would want this information at another time suggested that they would want the information if they requested it, if they had an unsuccessful application or that they would want the information to be publicly available for them to look at, for example online or as a leaflet.

How information should be communicated

Almost three in five survey respondents said that they would want information about what other support might be relevant to them as an information leaflet (59 per cent) or as information pages online (56 per cent).

Around half of respondents said that they would want an interactive web form that asks for details and makes suggestions (50 per cent), or would want this information through a face-to-face conversation with a Social Security Scotland staff member (47 per cent). Table 6 outlines respondents’ preferred ways of getting this information.

Table 4 (n=222)

Which of the following ways would you want Social Security Scotland to give you information about what other support might be relevant to you	
Information leaflets	59%
Information pages online	56%
An interactive web form that asks for your details and makes suggestions for you	50%
A face-to-face conversation with a staff member	47%
By phone	37%
Web chat	24%
In another way	9%

A number of respondents highlighted the importance of having a choice of communication methods for this information, or felt that it should be proactively offered during the application process.

“I am phobic with phones. Particularly unexpected calls. I am also not quite deaf I have a bad memory because of my disability. So a phone call is useless I'll forget what was said. I wouldn't be able to take notes now anyway.” Survey Respondent

“I would like to have a face-to-face conversation in which how my benefit/s were calculated and where I might get support if my total benefit was not going to cover my living costs” Survey Respondent

“I think it's important to keep the information concise, and in one letter/mail as far as possible. Some of us find it impossible to cope with the sheer amount of information/letters/printed words that are sent. This is even worse when more than one family member is involved.” Survey Respondent

Next steps

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 shape the service delivered by Social Security Scotland. In particular, the information from this report will inform decisions about how Social Security Scotland will communicate application updates to applicants. It will also be used to consider how Social Security Scotland can help people to access wider information and

support beyond what the organisation can offer itself. This will include how local services can signpost people to what is available in their local area.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route <specify or delete this text>
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact SocialSecurityExperience@gov.scot for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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