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# **Social Security Experience Panels: Help us design a way to keep Social Security Scotland staff and clients safe**



**EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY**



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Help us design a way to keep Social  
Security Scotland staff and clients safe**

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## Introduction

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits currently 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 across Scotland who have recent experience of claiming at least one of the benefits that are coming to Scotland registered as panel members.

The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design a new social security system that works for the people of Scotland.

From 9<sup>th</sup> July to 29<sup>th</sup> July, Scottish Government researchers conducted a survey of panel members to help design the processes for keeping Social Security Scotland staff and clients safe. This report outlines the findings from this survey. All quotes are from panel members taken from the survey responses.

## Summary

The survey was sent to all 2,250 panel members, and 293 responded, a response rate of 13%. When asked what kind of situations could result in feelings of frustration or anger when dealing with an organisation like Social Security Scotland, most respondents talked about lack of understanding from staff. Some other situations respondents mentioned were staff not listening to respondents or demonstrating poor communication or lack of trust and inaccessible venues.

Suggestions for ways to reduce frustration and anger included Social Security Scotland always informing clients about what will happen at their appointments. Another popular response was the need for staff training. Respondents felt that as well as staff treating clients well, the organisation should consider the wider client's needs, for example by providing childcare facilities within the organisation.

Respondents were asked how Social Security Scotland can help reduce anger or frustration in circumstances where the client's existing health condition may have impacted on their behaviour and how they are perceived. The majority of respondents felt that the building should have a friendly environment and for staff to ask and listen to what clients' needs are and accommodate them. Over

nine in ten respondents (95 per cent) would want Social Security Scotland to store information on a client's accessibility needs or disability to make it easier to interact with them.

Respondents were asked how the staff should respond to situations where clients may be displaying unacceptable actions. Within an office environment, the most common response was that within the building there should be a quiet area to calm down. The majority of respondents also felt that staff should be paired up when dealing with someone who may be displaying unacceptable actions. Over the phone, most respondents felt that staff should end the call, but always call back after a period of time to let clients calm down. The majority of respondents emphasised that staff should always interact with clients respectfully and kindly. When visiting a client in their house, respondents felt that staff should always go in pairs.

Respondents were asked what actions Social Security Scotland should take if a person's actions have been deemed unacceptable and considered a risk to staff or other clients. The majority of respondents (80 per cent) felt that the organisation should limit face to face contact and only allow it if two staff members are present. The second most popular response was to only allow contact through third parties, for example an advocate.

Respondents were asked if they felt that it was important to alert staff before they interact with a client who had previously displayed unacceptable actions. Almost nine in ten respondents (89 per cent) felt that it was important to alert staff. Respondents felt that alerting staff could help them handle the situation.

A few respondents (4%) had said that staff should not be alerted to individuals who previously displayed unacceptable actions. A further 6% of respondents were not sure if staff should be alerted. These respondents felt that this knowledge could negatively affect interactions between staff and clients.

Respondents were asked how Social Security Scotland should communicate their decisions to those who had displayed unacceptable actions. The most popular response was through the post (88 per cent), with the second most popular being through email (44 per cent).

Social Security Scotland will offer the right of review of any decision on unacceptable actions at any time. Respondents were asked what sort of information people should be told about the decision, before deciding whether to ask for a review. The respondents who provided a comment suggested information about the events that have happened, about the decision that was made and who made it.

Respondents were asked how they feel about Social Security Scotland sharing information about unacceptable actions with other organisations. Almost half of the respondents (46 per cent) would feel very comfortable or comfortable with data being shared with other organisations such as the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) or local authorities.

Respondents were asked how Social Security Scotland should let people know about the policy on unacceptable actions. The majority of respondents (between 78% and 83%) were comfortable or very comfortable with the policy being advertised in each of the locations listed in the survey (websites, offices, Citizen's Advice Bureau, GP clinics). The least popular was GP clinics with 10% saying they would feel uncomfortable with this.

This research is being used to inform the ongoing development and design of unacceptable actions policy. As part of this it will also be used to help develop staff to ensure they are capable, aware and responsive to the complex needs of individuals.

## **Background and Research Methods**

This report outlines the findings from a survey that took place in July 2019 with Experience Panel members to help design a way to keep Social Security Scotland staff and clients safe.

All panel members were invited to take part in the survey. Participation in Experience Panels research is optional, and in this case 293 Experience Panel Members chose to respond to the survey either online, over the phone or through the post. The survey was written in plain English to ensure it was clear what was being asked. This survey is a mix of closed ended and open ended question to allow panel members to express their views.

Within the survey, respondents were specifically asked about:

- Situations that cause frustration and anger between staff and clients
- How staff can respond to situations where clients may be displaying unacceptable actions
- What communications there should be about this process
- Sharing data about unacceptable actions with other organisations

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 are coming to Scotland. The results of this work should be regarded as being reflective of the experience and views of the 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 participants.

## About the Participants

Information from the survey was added to information from the '*About Your Benefits and You*'<sup>1</sup> and '*Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*'<sup>2</sup> surveys. The demographic data collected in these surveys was linked to the information supplied previously by participants as part of the longitudinal data set for this project. The following demographic information is given to give context to the findings from the survey.

Not all responses were linked in this way. This was due to missing or unclear information from the survey responses or participants not having previously supplied us with the relevant demographic information. 191 of respondents demographic data was linked to the information supplied previously.

Around two thirds of respondents whose data we could link identified as 'woman or girl' (71 per cent) and a third (27 per cent) of participants identified as 'Man or boy'.

**Table 1. Gender of respondents (n=191)**

Gender	%
Man or boy	27
Woman or girl	71
Prefer not to say	2
Total	100

<sup>1</sup> 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/](http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/11/7769/)

<sup>2</sup> 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/](http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083/)

Around half of respondents whose data we could link were aged 45 or over (49 per cent) with just over two in ten aged between 25 and 44 (17 per cent).

**Table 2. Age of respondents (n=191)**

Age group	%
16-24	1
25-44	16
45-59	49
60-79	33
Prefer not to say	1
Total	100

Over eight out of ten respondents whose data we could link (84 per cent) said that they had had a disability or long term condition.

**Table 3. Disability or long term health condition (n= 187)**

Disability or long term condition	%
Yes	84
No	16
Total	100

Over half of respondents whose data we could link were carers for an adult or child with a disability, or for someone due to old age (53 per cent).

**Table 4. Caring responsibilities of respondents (n=81)**

Caring responsibilities	%
Carer	53
Not a Carer	46
Prefer not to say	1
Total	100



The majority of respondents whose data we could link were living within an urban area (80 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 5. Urban or Rural (n= 191)**

Location	%
Rural	20
Urban	80
Total	100

The majority of respondents who completed this survey told us that they have experience of Disability Living Allowance (80 per cent). Around a half have experience of Personal Independence Payment (52 per cent), Winter Fuel Payment or Carer’s Allowance (49 per cent). A third of respondents have experience of Discretionary Housing Payment (33 per cent).

**Table 6. Benefit experience (n=191)**

Benefit	%
Personal Independence Payment	80
Disability Living Allowance	52
Winter Fuel Payment	49
Carer’s Allowance	35
Discretionary Housing Payment	33
Severe Disablement Allowance	28
Attendance Allowance	26
Funeral Expenses	9
Sure Start Maternity Grant	3
Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit	2
Scottish Welfare Fund	1

<sup>3</sup> 17 per cent 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](http://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00541327.pdf)

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' <sup>4</sup>.

## Situations that cause frustration or anger when interacting with organisations

Respondents were asked what situations can result in feelings of frustration or anger when interacting with an organisation like Social Security Scotland. The following themes emerged in the responses.

### Understanding of a client's situation

One of the key themes in the responses was staff demonstrating a lack of understanding of the client's situation.

"If I was talking with an agent and they only reinforced the opinion of the agency without taking into consideration that what they are talking about greatly affects my life, then I would get frustrated".

"Staff not understanding an emotional/mental health crisis".

### Communication issues

Communication issues with staff was another key theme that emerged from the responses, and within this a range of points were made. The majority of respondents felt that staff not listening to the client properly was another issue that can cause feelings of frustrations or anger.

"The Advisor not listening properly to the client or saying "their hands are tied" or refusing to take a matter further with senior staff".

"Feeling unheard by member of staff dealing with claim".

Some of the respondents felt that not understanding what staff say or repeating themselves was frustrating.

"Someone with a strong accent that I'm unable to understand".

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<sup>4</sup> 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](http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083)

“Poor or slow communication. Repetitions of processes”.

Finally, a few of the respondents mentioned that being told wrong information or use of hard to understand language caused anger/frustration.

“The use of complicated language and misinformation”.

### **Timing issues**

Some respondents felt that timing and delays could cause feelings of frustration. Some of the respondents talked about delays in public transport, being kept waiting on arrival, and time taken overall, as well as challenges of fitting in appointments with care responsibilities.

“Being held up by public transport delays or similar”.

“Being kept waiting by staff for a long time without acknowledgement or explanation”.

“Long distances to travel to appointments”.

“Claimant needing to be home for childcare issues/end of school day (or having to take children with them to social security meeting”.

### **Venue accessibility**

Finally, a couple of respondents had felt that inaccessibility of the venue was another cause of concern. Offices that are hard to reach were mentioned by a couple of respondents as a source of frustration or anger.

“Offices in hard to reach places, not enough parking and not on public transport routes”.

# How to reduce feelings of frustration or anger between clients and organisations like Social Security Scotland

Respondents were asked what Social Security Scotland should put in place to help reduce feelings of frustration or anger. A range of themes emerged from the responses.

## Information

Respondents felt that Social Security Scotland should always inform clients about what will happen at their appointments.

“Ensure that people are fully aware of what is going to happen at appointments”.

“It should be made clear to the client what to expect from a visit, how long and the aims of the visit”.

## Staff training

Respondents felt that it was crucial for staff to be trained to know how to interact with clients, including specifically training on how to interact with people with different disabilities.

“Highly trained staff who understand and can empathise with the difficulties individuals are experiencing”.

“Training Programmes to make aware the different situations people are having with their condition”.

“Good staff training”.

## Meeting client's needs

Many respondents felt that Social Security Scotland should focus on the clients' specific needs and get their opinion on how to make the interview less stressful for them. Some gave specific examples.

“It may be during an interview the claimant is becoming frustrated because their literacy skills might not be good so using images or powerpoint slides, explaining a process or giving them the time and opportunity to take notes”.

Respondents felt that clients should be encouraged to go to these sessions with someone who can support them.

“Encourage people to bring their support worker, friend/family or advocate”.

A couple of respondents mentioned having childcare facilities can help.

“Short term child care on the premises”.

Respondents said that the building should be accessible for all.

“Accesible venues, not in busy city centres where it is noisy, impossible and expensive to park”.

### **Positive atmosphere**

Respondents felt that making the building as friendly as possible would reduce feelings of frustrations and anger. Respondents often specifically suggested making the atmosphere more pleasant within the waiting area.

“Have someone welcome individuals and checking in on individuals as they are waiting to enquire if they are ok”.

“Make the waiting area more welcoming”.

“Tea,coffee and biscuits provided”.

### **Safe quiet space available**

Many respondents suggested that having a safe space in Social Security Scotland to calm down would help with anger/frustration. This point is returned to below.

“Have a room that is quiet where someone can go to to take time out and calm down”.

# How Social Security Scotland can help clients with a health condition

Respondents were asked if a specific health condition caused them to become angry or frustrated with Social Security Scotland, what they would suggest could be put in place to reduce this.

## Staff Training

Most of the respondents said that the organisation having prior knowledge of the condition could help staff in interacting with clients. They asked for training for staff on the different conditions so that they know what to do when they come across them.

“A bit of knowledge in advance of a client and their condition could help greatly reduce frustration in the client. Personally I need time to read over things as I’m partially sighted. If I’m rushed I can get anxious and frustrated and then that affects my mental health too”.

“Information about the condition should be given to the staff”.

“I am totally blind and find that many people have little or no understanding of sight loss issues. The prevailing attitude is that sight loss equals cognitive issues. Staff need to be able to guide a person with sight loss in the way the person prefers”.

## Flagging individual’s needs to staff

Respondents felt that listening to clients about their accessibility needs and preferences would help make them comfortable in Social Security Scotland spaces.

“Giving everyone an even chance to be themselves and to have the best place and time of day possible for them to represent themselves well would be best for everyone. The best person to ask is the client, let them in on the management of their own needs”.

Some respondents felt that flagging the individual’s needs (in their own words) on the system could help staff to tailor their interaction.

“I have poor concentration, and short term memory loss. I misinterpret their questions or was not consistent in my answers especially when I’m stressed. Perhaps something on my system that highlighted to any member of staff my poor concentration and memory and need for short simple questions”.

“By allowing the client to state they have issues prior to the interview”.

### Other suggestions for positive interactions

Echoing the points about timing made above, respondents asked that Social Security value their time and not make them wait.

“Do not make the individuals wait. Space appointments so individuals are seen as soon as they arrive”.

One respondent felt that reducing face to face interaction between clients and staff would be beneficial for clients with communication and/or social impairments.

“Limiting appointments that are face to face and limiting questioning would be the most helpful across the range of communication and social impairments”.

Finally, respondents suggested that having a friendly atmosphere for clients when they enter would help reduce the potential for frustration and anger.

“Have someone welcome them as soon as they arrive (not behind a desk) show them where to go and introduce themselves”.

### Storing information

Respondents were asked if they would want Social Security Scotland to store information about any accessibility or disability needs to make interacting with the organisation easier. Nearly all (95 per cent) said they would want Social Security Scotland to store their accessibility needs or disability to make interactions easier.

**Table 7. If you tell us something about your accessibility needs or disability to make it easier for you to interact with Social Security Scotland, would you want Social Security Scotland to store this information in order to improve future contacts? (n=293)**

Social Security Scotland storing information	%
Yes	95
No	1
I don't know	3
Total	99

## Staff response to unacceptable actions

Respondents were asked how they thought staff should respond to situations where clients may be displaying unacceptable actions. They were asked about situations occurring in an office environment, over the phone, and during home visits.

### In an office environment

Within an office environment, the majority of respondents suggested that clients should be given a space within the office where they can calm down.

“Let the person have some time to calm down in a quiet area”.

“Have a cooling off area”.

“Give the client space, a quiet area, a safe space to reduce their anxiety”.

Another popular response given by respondents was that staff should be paired up when dealing with a client who may be displaying unacceptable actions.

“Remain calm and should the member of staff feel uncomfortable or in danger then get another staff member to sit in and assess if security or police need to be present”.

“Each office should have two people working together who are trained in techniques to calm an angry person”.

Many of the respondents felt that training staff in knowing how to handle any problem with clients was essential to managing these situations well.

“De-escalation is key and training in this specific area is an absolute key essential”.

“Staff should be safeguarded too so they should be trained in defusing situations”.



## **Over the phone**

Respondents suggested that the call should end when a staff member was faced with unacceptable actions over the phone, but the staff member should always call back.

“If the person won’t calm down then tell them you have to terminate the call if they continue but that you will call back after a certain length of time (15 minutes) to see if they are ready to continue”.

“There should be a cooling off period allowed before the call is made again, perhaps 2 hours later”.

“The call would have to be ended, but an attempt to re-establish contact should be made and a message left stating what will happen next. For example, someone will try again later, or tomorrow when things have calmed down”.

Respondents reiterated that staff should talk to the client respectfully and patiently when on the phone.

“Acknowledge their problem. Ask if they would prefer to do another time/another way to give them time to calm down”.

“With kindness and patience. Have the time to find out what is wrong”.

“Stay calm, rather than reacting to behaviour. Explain certain behaviour is not acceptable, but give the client some time and space to calm down and evaluate, maybe offer call back to give client a second chance to sort things out”.

## **When visiting a client in their house**

Like within the office environment, the majority of respondents said that staff should go in pairs during home visits.

“Maybe visit in twos and the client could have a trusted carer in attendance”.

“Go in pairs”.

“Home visits should be conducted by two people”.

Respondents felt that staff should leave in the event of unacceptable actions but always arrange another appointment.

“Ask if they want some ‘time out’. Arrange another appointment if needs to be”.

“Advise you need to leave and will reschedule for a more appropriate time when they are not feeling so distressed”.

Respondents had said that staff should speak to clients respectfully when facing with an unacceptable action.

“A calm and professional manner”.

### **Actions following unacceptable actions**

The survey asked what Social Security Scotland should do when a client has displayed unacceptable actions. The majority of respondents felt that to reduce the risk to staff or other clients, two staff members should be present during face to face interactions. The second most popular option was allowing contact through third parties only (70 per cent).

**Table 8. What actions do you think Social Security Scotland should take if a person’s actions have been deemed unacceptable and therefore, considered a risk to staff or other clients? (n=291)**

<b>Actions to reduce risk</b>	<b>%</b>
Limit face to face contact and only do so, if two staff members are present	80
Only allow contact through third parties, for example an advocate	70
Only allow contact in writing	36
Only allow contact for certain topics	23
Other, please specify	12

Almost nine in ten respondents (89 per cent) felt that it is important to alert staff before they interact with clients who had previously displayed unacceptable actions.

**Table 9. If a client has displayed unacceptable actions in the past, do you think it is important that we alert our staff before they interact with the client? (n=293)**

Alerting staff	%
Yes	89
No	4
I don't know	6
Total	99

A chi-square of association was carried out to identify any differences in the responses in alerting staff members. There was a significant association<sup>5</sup> between age and notifying staff on unacceptable actions. All respondents between 16-44 wanted staff to be alerted compared to 84 per cent of respondents aged between 45-79.

Respondents who provided further comments on this point felt that staff should know who they are dealing with and how to handle the situation, but that the information should not be used to judge the client or treat them badly.

“Staff need to be fully informed of potential problems so they can deal with the situation appropriately and safely”.

“It’s important staff are aware before visiting that a situation may escalate. But approaching clients with kindness and patience, and giving them opportunity to improve their behaviour is important”.

“Yes inform staff to make them aware of potential situation. Staff must not pre-judge with this knowledge or treat individual differently”.

Respondents felt that alerting staff of previous unacceptable actions can help staff handle the situation.

“It would be easier to anticipate potential problems and try to avoid them. Also you need to know if you should not see the client alone”.

A small number of respondents (4 per cent) felt that staff should not be informed, while 6 per cent weren’t sure if they should be informed about

<sup>5</sup>  $\chi^2(9, n=191) = 18.85$ , exact  $p=0.027$ . This is not representative of all individuals who have benefits devolved to Social Security Scotland.

individuals who previously displayed unacceptable actions. These respondents felt that if staff knew before then that could negatively affect the interaction between staff and client.

“This may cause interviewer to expect violent behaviour and behave in a more defensive manner”.

“Of course measures should be taken to keep everyone safe, but I also feel that having certain information available before dealing with a new agent could make them prejudice towards the client”.

“This information could bias a staff members attitude towards the client”.

## Communication about the process

The most popular option for communicating to clients about a Social Security Scotland decision to put in place one of these measures was through post (88 per cent). This was followed by communicating through email (44%).

A chi-square test showed a significant association<sup>6</sup> between gender and how respondents would want to receive a decision. Half of the males, compared to about one thirds of females, would want to receive decision by emails.

**Table 10. If a person had acted in an unacceptable way, Social Security Scotland might decide to put one of the measures mentioned above in place. How do you think Social Security Scotland should tell them about this decision? (n=290)**

Communicate decision	%
Through post	88
Through email	44
Over the phone	37
Other	21

Social Security Scotland will offer the right of review of any decision on unacceptable actions at any time. A review will include looking at what led to the original decision being taken and what contact has been made since, as

<sup>6</sup>  $\chi^2(3, n=191) = 8.9$ , exact  $p=0.031$ . This is not representative of all individuals who have benefits devolved to Social Security Scotland.

well as any impact on the client. Respondents were asked what sort of information people should be told about a decision, before asking for a review. Nearly all of the respondents felt that clients should be given the full information as to why a measure was put in place.

“All of the information held in connection with the incident and decision should be made available to the client”.

“Why exactly was decision taken”.

“Reasons the decision was made and who made the decision”.

“The criteria for the decision and suggestions about what might help create positive change which might alter the decision”.

Respondents felt that Social Security Scotland should always be truthful about any decision they make.

“All related information should be available. Honesty and transparency is a must”.

Respondents also said that clients should also be provided with support.

“Support should be offered to the client”.

“The full facts of the situations, plus where to find counselling/support if they wish”.

## Sharing data with other organisations

Respondents were asked how they feel about Social Security Scotland sharing information about unacceptable actions with other organisations. Nearly half of respondents (46 per cent) said they would feel very comfortable or comfortable with sharing data with other organisations such as the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) or local authorities. Nearly four in ten respondents (36 per cent) were uncomfortable/ very uncomfortable with data being shared.

**Table 11. How do you feel about Social Security Scotland sharing information about unacceptable actions and control measures with other organisations who deal with that client, such as the DWP or local authorities? (n=293)**

Sharing information with other organisations	%
Very comfortable	24
Comfortable	22
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	17
Uncomfortable	20
Very uncomfortable	16
Total	99

## Advertising unacceptable actions policy

Respondents were asked how they would feel about Social Security Scotland’s policy on unacceptable actions being advertised. Nearly eight in ten respondents (79 per cent) felt comfortable or very comfortable with Social Security Scotland advertising unacceptable actions policy on websites.

**Table 12. Social Security Scotland would like to let clients know about this policy. How would you feel if this policy on unacceptable actions was advertised on websites (n=293):**

On Websites	%
Very comfortable	57
Comfortable	22
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	14
Uncomfortable	3
Very uncomfortable	4
Total	100

Over eight in ten respondents (83 per cent) felt very comfortable or comfortable with this policy being advertised in offices.

**Table 13. In offices (n=293)**

Offices	%
Very comfortable	58
Comfortable	25
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	10
Uncomfortable	4
Very uncomfortable	3
Total	100

The majority of respondents (81 per cent) said they felt very comfortable or comfortable with this policy being advertised within Citizen's Advice Bureau.

**Table 14. In Citizen's Advice Bureau (n=293)**

Citizen's Advice Bureau	%
Very comfortable	58
Comfortable	23
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	11
Uncomfortable	4
Very uncomfortable	4
Total	100

Over seven in ten respondents (78 per cent) felt very comfortable or comfortable with the policy being advertised in GP clinics. One in ten respondents (10 per cent) said they would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the policy being advertised in GP clinics.

**Table 15. GP clinics (n=293)**

GP Clinics	%
Very comfortable	55
Comfortable	23
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	12
Uncomfortable	5
Very uncomfortable	5
Total	100

## Next Steps

This research will be used to inform the ongoing development and design of unacceptable actions policy which will shape the service delivered by Social Security Scotland. This research will, in particular, inform staff development to ensure they are capable, aware and responsive to the complex needs of individuals.

These findings will be shared with key stakeholders and will ensure the needs of the clients of Social Security Scotland are considered and addressed.

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.





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