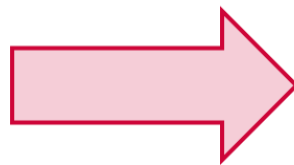


Social Security Experience Panels: Decision Making and Reviewing an Award

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 work to prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels.

**Department
for Work and
Pensions**



**Scottish
Government**



Over 2,400 people from across Scotland have joined the Experience Panels. They all have recent experience of the benefits that are coming to Scotland.



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

**2,400+
Experience Panel
members**

About the research

This report gives the findings of the 'telling you about your benefit application' research. Panel members with experience of disability benefits were invited to take part.



1109
invites



228
survey
responses

The research took place in



2019



17
focus
groups



11
locations

This research gathered views on:



How Social Security Scotland can help clients understand the decisions that are made on their benefit applications.



What happens when a benefit award is reviewed.

Helping clients understand decision making

Telling clients about a decision

Focus group participants were asked how they would want Social Security Scotland to tell them about the decision on their application.



The vast majority said they would want a letter through the post.

“Paper copies are the best, as you can use it as proof for other things and it also makes the decision ‘more real.’”

“Letter is better for individual’s records.”

“Letter because it’s easier to share the decision with anyone who might be helping you.”



Some participants said they would be happy with finding out the decision on an application by email.



This was because they thought it offered a quicker response. However most said they would still like a follow up letter in the post.

Some participants had concerns about email getting lost or missed.

“Depending where you live, email response or text notice, signal goes off and on in this town.”

“I think that some don’t have email, some people may be homeless.”

“Not everyone has a printer or a smartphone to show other people it – you can delete an email by accident.”



The least popular way of finding out the decision on an application among participants was telephone. Participants explained that the phone had some downsides:



there is no record of the conversation



it might be difficult for some people to remember or understand the detail of the conversation



it is easy to miss a phone call, or it could happen at an unsuitable time



It isn't suitable for some people, e.g. those who with hearing loss or deafness, and those who find talking on the phone makes them nervous

“The phone calls are carried out with no regard for where an individual is at any time and the emotional impact that this can have on the individual.”

“Being told I was unsuccessful isn't something I'd want to hear over the phone.”

“May misunderstand if it's over the phone – may [get] cross wires and [it's] difficult as you can't have proof. Some people might not remember what was said over the phone.”



A few participants said that they would like to find out the decision by text message or get a text message to tell them that a decision had been made.

However these participants were in the minority.



Some participants said that it is important for clients to choose their preferred communication method.

“People should have the option on how they're contacted – some people are not computer literate so should always have a letter.”



All participants said that they would like to find out about the decision the same way, whether successful or unsuccessful.

Helping clients understand a decision



Survey respondents were asked how Social Security Scotland can best help clients understand decisions which are made on applications.

The most common response was that information should be clear, simple and easy to understand.



Like focus group participants, many respondents said that a letter would help them understand the decision.



Many respondents suggested that any decision letter should contain detailed reasons for the decision. It should note the evidence used.

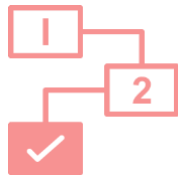
“Letter with a good layout so we can understand the decision and what happens next.”

“Applicants should be sent a letter which explains simply and without jargon what the decision is and the basis for the decision.”

“List clearly which pieces of evidence were used to score each section and make overall decision.”

“State clearly how the decision came about. State what criteria was and how I did or did not satisfy the criteria.”

A few respondents suggested that the following would help them understand a decision taken on an application:



Clear communication through all stages of the application



A named person within Social Security Scotland to contact



A copy of the face to face assessment report



Information about the decision making process



Information about the appeals process



Next steps and timescales

One idea for the future is that Social Security Scotland will send applicants a decision letter and a detailed report to explain the decision.



Almost all focus group participants said that they thought this was a good idea.



Participants were asked what sort of information they would find useful in the decision letter and report.



Most participants mentioned the same kind of information as survey respondents above.

“A clear signpost if you need to talk to someone or understand this, here’s the number to contact.”

“Something short on appeals - if you disagree, this is what you should do, the next stage is, who to contact, timescales. A road map.”

“Have the really important stuff right at the beginning in big letters. First which benefit the award is for, then if it has been awarded, if so how much and how long for.”

“Specific medical evidence that has been used, what kind of expert/individual has looked at it.”

Participants were asked why they would find this sort of information useful. They said:



The information is about them and they are entitled to it



It would allow them to check what information had been used



They would file the report to use in the future



It would be useful if they needed to appeal or reapply

“A detailed report would allow clients to see where the misunderstanding or problem has occurred and target those elements. People forget things on the form. A specific set of examples on how the supporting information has been understood, may trigger more of that, would prove useful at the reconsideration stage.”



Most participants said that they would want the report whether their application was successful or unsuccessful.



Only a few participants felt that they wouldn't need or want a detailed report if the application was successful.

“The more paperwork that goes out to everyone, the more expensive the system becomes. If you’re successful you don’t need that detailed report. If you want to take it forward then you can ask for it.”

Participants were asked how the letter and report should be formatted.



Like survey respondents, most participants said that the letter and report should be short and written in plain English.



Some participants said that the letter should only have important award information and next steps. Any information about evidence, disabilities or health conditions should be in the report.

“Clear words people can understand.”

“Make sure the decision letter is on top.”

“Explanation of the process/terms in a leaflet in easy read.”

“I wouldn’t want my personal health condition in letter I would be handing to receptions on a decision letter.”

“The letter should be basic information on how much, when available from, when the first payment will be. Then ‘please see attached report for further info regarding decision’.”

Assessment report

Respondents and participants were told that one idea for the future is that Social Security Scotland will send applicants a copy of their face to face assessment report. This would be sent alongside the decision letter and detailed report.



Over nine in ten respondents said they would want a copy of their face to face assessment report:

- If they were awarded the benefit
- If they were not awarded the benefit
- If they were awarded a lower level of award than they were expecting



Most focus group participants said that they would want a copy of their assessment report, regardless of whether their application was successful or unsuccessful.

They said they would want this for the same reasons they would want the detailed decision report.



A minority of participants said that it could be made an option for people to ask for the assessment report.



This is because they thought that it might be overwhelming or distressing to get this report, especially if unsuccessful.

“Give people the option, everyone is entitled – ‘if you would like a copy of this’...due to the cases where it wouldn't be a positive experience.”

Criteria

One idea for the future is that Social Security Scotland will send clients information on the criteria for the benefit. This would be sent alongside the decision letter and detailed report.



Over nine in ten respondents said that they would want information on the benefit criteria (94 per cent).



Around six in ten respondents said they would want this sent by post (62 per cent).



One third preferred email (33 per cent).

In contrast, most focus group participants said that benefit criteria should be given at the application stage.

“Criteria is usually a before thing, that comes with application and info. Should have it already.”



Survey respondents were asked if there is anything else Social Security Scotland should include with the decision letter.

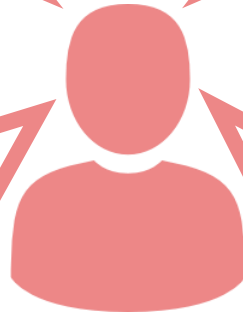
The most common response was information about appealing the decision.

“Information about what to do if I don't agree with the decision.”

“A clear explanation of the appeals process and all the stages involved, with timescales.”

“A list of agencies to which the client can ask for help if needed, e.g. if a decision is made for either no payment or a lesser amount.”

“Links to community support/schemes/things they could be benefiting from. Organisations in the local area.”



Reviewing a benefit award



Respondents were asked how far in advance they would like Social Security Scotland to contact them to tell them it will be reviewing the benefit award.



Over three in ten said they would like to be contacted about one month before the review.

One to three weeks



About a month



About two months



About three months



Longer than three months



Focus group participants were asked if they would like Social Security Scotland to contact them to tell them that a benefit award will be reviewed.



Participants held mixed views on this. Many said that they would rather not be told that their award was being reviewed because this would cause them to worry.

“I would really hate to get something in advance. Every brown envelope puts me in panic. To warn me to be put under review will not let me sleep.”

“If I get a letter stating I got something re-assessed then it would put my mind in the worst case scenario.”

Other participants wanted to know.

“When you get your award you should tell us when it will be reviewed and stick to that, it’s awful being reviewed out of the blue for no apparent reason.”

“Need sight of any evidence so there’s a right to reply before the decision made. Should say what evidence [they have] got and ask [if] I agree with it.”



Respondents were asked how much notice Social Security Scotland should give to clients in two situations. If a review found they were no longer eligible for a benefit, or the amount they were getting was going to change.

Most respondents said that Social Security Scotland should give about one month’s notice or two months’ notice:

Between one to three weeks



About a month



About two months



More than two months



We also asked focus group participants how much notice they would like if the award amount was going to change after a review. The most common response was a 'couple of months.'



Over eight in ten survey respondents said they would like to receive a notification that their benefit award is ending by post (83 per cent)



Four in ten said they would like the notification by email (41 per cent).



The least popular options for a notification that a benefit award is ending were text message (14 per cent) and phone call (10 per cent).

Survey respondents were asked what information they would like Social Security Scotland to include when they communicate a change or end of award.



A majority respondents said they would want a detailed explanation of why the benefit award is changing and the information used to make that decision.

What's next?

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Experience Panels in the development of Scotland's new social security system.

In particular you told us:

Choosing the best communication method for you is important.



Clients will be able to state their preference for communication methods when applying.

Understanding the reason for a decision about an award needs to be clear and easy to understand.



The plan is that clients will receive a decision letter telling them in plain English whether they are eligible for an award. Additionally, they will receive a decision report.

A copy of a consultation (assessment) report would be useful to receive with the decision letter.



If an individual has had a consultation (assessment), the report will be included in the decision notification as standard.

Clear information about the details of the award, review and appeals should be included in the decision letter.



Social Security Scotland will set out the amount of the award, payment details and timescales for payment and review in a way that is straight forward and easy to understand. Information about how to appeal and the process to appeal will be included with the decision letter.



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ISBN: 978-1-83960-719-6

Published by the Scottish Government, May 2020