Social Security Experience Panels: Inclusive Communication

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 'inclusive communication' research.

2170
Invites

438
Survey responses

The research took place in

AUG

2019

9
Focus groups

8
Locations

The research asked Experience Panel members views on:

Applying for a benefit

General communication preferences

Getting help with a benefit application

Online information videos

Participants were aged between

25 – 79

years old

37%
Man or boy

63%
Woman or girl

83%
lived in an urban location

17%
lived in an rural location
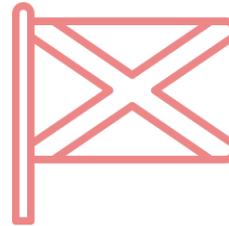
Participants took part in
31
out of
32
local authority areas

Most survey participants had a **disability** or **long term health condition (87%)**, including:

chronic pain

severe hearing impairments
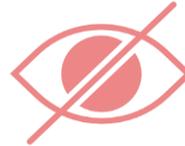
severe visual impairments

other kinds of long term health condition

Almost half (49%) of survey participants were:

a carer due to **old age,**

a carer to a **child**, or

a carer to an **adult.**

Applying for a benefit

We asked respondents how they would be most likely to apply for a benefit from Social Security Scotland.

More than half of respondents said they would apply themselves (54 per cent).

Four in ten (40 per cent) said they would apply themselves but with some help from someone else. Six per cent said they would get someone else to apply for them.

Method of Applying

Over half of respondents (53 per cent) said they would prefer to apply online using a computer, tablet or mobile phone.

One quarter (26 per cent) selected post using a paper form.

14 per cent said they would prefer to apply in person, whether through a home visit or at a Social Security Scotland venue.

6 per cent said they would apply over the phone.

We asked respondents why they would like to apply through their preferred method.

Online using a computer, **mobile phone or using a tablet**

Respondents who preferred to apply online using a computer said that it was quicker, easier and more convenient.

"It is fast, convenient and flexible as it can be done at home."

"Will be received quicker than posting a form. Hopefully will be dealt with quicker."

Some respondents felt that applying online reduced the chance of an application going missing.

Other respondents said that online was an easier way for them to apply because they are familiar with online applications.

"Applying online you get a received reply from the recipient letting you know they have your message and will be in touch soon. Cuts out postage and possible loss or mishandling of documentation and also saves time and money for everyone."

Many respondents said that applying online is more accessible for them due to their disability or health condition.

Some of these respondents explained that they adjust their device settings to suit their needs, or that they use assistive technology.

"I am visually impaired and need assistive technology to access day to day information if it is available electronically."

"I have mobility problems and this is why I would prefer to do this online. I have difficulty getting to a post office to post forms
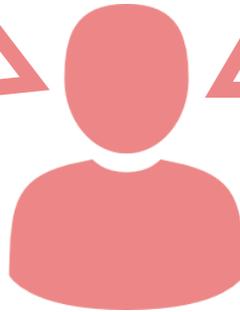
Many respondents said they would apply online because they could take their time with the application. Others said that it would allow them to edit the application form more easily.

Post using a paper form

Most respondents said a paper form allowed them to take their time with the application. This included taking breaks, having time to think about their answers and checking it over.

"I want time to look at the questions, sometimes going through these in a different order than list. With fatigue I need to be able to pick it up and put it down in my own pace and time, and not feel pressured as other forms make me, i.e. online in any form, or to feel pressured to verbally answer to someone over the phone."

Other reasons for preferring to apply using a paper form included:

It can be easily copied and stored for personal records.

Not having access to or being comfortable using technology to apply online.

It feels more reliable and secure than other methods.

It makes it easy to get help from others.

"If it is a paper form I can pick it up and put it down as and when pain/discomfort dictates."

"With so many online scams and data being illegally accessed if an application arrives by post you know it to be genuine."

"Using post I can have a record of when I posted and what it said."

"It does not rely on an internet connection."

In person through a home visit or at a Social Security Scotland location

Respondents who preferred to apply in person gave a range of reasons. The most common reason was because they have limited mobility.

Other respondents said that they would prefer to apply face to face. These respondents felt that staff would be able to explain the form and answer any questions.

Others said that they found it difficult to explain their circumstances in writing. A few said they would feel more at ease and less stressed applying in their own home.
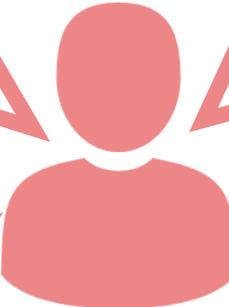
"I prefer speaking to people, I sometimes struggle to write on forms with what I mean whereas I can communicate it better."

"Difficulty in leaving house due to disability and writing is illegible therefore a home visit from a member of staff would be easier for me."

"I would prefer to see someone to check over my form and ensure I am completing it correctly and also to ask questions if I am stuck with parts of the form."

"The forms can be confusing and trying to get help via the phone is a nightmare. Being able to apply with someone sitting there with you would help to lessen some of the stress."

Telephone

Respondents who preferred to apply over the phone said that they prefer speaking to someone. This included having the chance to speak to Social Security Scotland staff and ask any questions.

Some respondents felt that applying over the phone is also easier and quicker.

"It is being able to speak to a person and not having to worry if it has been completed correctly."

A few respondents said that their disability or health condition means that it is not possible to apply through other methods.

"Being visually impaired I find form filling almost impossible."

Overall, around two thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said their disability influences how they would like to apply.

Reasons for not using online methods

We asked respondents who did not choose an online method what, if anything, put them off from applying online.

Nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) said they don't feel comfortable submitting personal data online.

Over four in ten (42 per cent) said that applying online feels impersonal.

Around one third (34 per cent) said they need help from someone else because of their disability.

Three in ten (30 percent) said that they don't feel confident using computers.

Some respondents said 'another reason' put them off applying online:

"I want extra time and not to have to apply all in one sitting."

"Something going wrong so info is lost while completing."

"I can only use library computers for one hour at a time. Sometimes I can't remember my library number and pin code."

"I can't keep a copy of what I've submitted. That means I worry about it being lost or if it is referred to I can't always remember what I said."

Other respondents said they do not have a good broadband or mobile signal or enough mobile data.

Some said they cannot afford to use internet at home or their nearest internet location is too far away.

We asked those respondents where they would like to go to apply online.

Four in ten (40 per cent) said they would prefer a Social Security Scotland worker to come to their home.
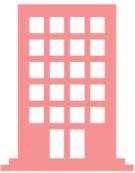
Just over two in ten (22 per cent) said the library or a Social Security Scotland building.

Other respondents said they would like to go to a friend or family member, or Citizens Advice Bureau to apply online. Some said that they did not want to apply online.

Communication preferences
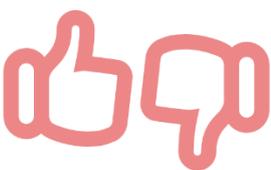
We asked focus group participants to tell us what they like and dislike about the different ways they might communicate with Social Security Scotland more generally.

Letter – likes

These are the things that participants said they liked about letters.

Physical document, creates a paper trail	Time to think about the information, can return to it at any time
Can take it to someone else for help	Does not need technology, reliable

"I like having something physical. It's a piece of validation and hard proof that I can use to challenge something if necessary."

"It's reliable, dependable, you don't lose it if the computer crashes."

"You can take your time and read it through. There's no chance of picking up the wrong information and it's there in paper so you can refer back to it. It means you have something to take to someone else if you don't understand something."

Letter – dislikes

These are the things that participants said they disliked about letters.

Slow

Post can 'get lost'

Cost of delivery

Environmental worries about using paper

Difficult for those without a permanent address

Difficult for those who cannot read or write

"It's not readily accessible – it's slower than communicating via phone or email."

"Items go missing and people can claim they haven't got things."

Phone – likes

These are the things that participants said they liked about the phone.

Feels more personal	Can sometimes get a quick response, useful for quick queries
It's a two way discussion, can ask questions	Can be told about other information and services

"I like the phone and there are days when I can't walk. So in that respect an email, text message or letter won't get there in time so in that respect its good."

"There's a personal touch, you're speaking to a real person."

Phone – dislikes

These are the things that participants said they disliked about the phone.

Menu options can be confusing

No record of the discussion

Cost, concerns about security

Can forget or not understand, less time to think

Language barriers

Can be kept on hold and passed around different staff

"You might forget what was said or might not be able to process all the information unless you try and write it down."

Email – likes

These are the things that participants said they liked about email.

Quick, convenient	Time to think
There is a record of when it is sent and received	Easy to edit, easy to store

"You can do it in your own time, and you can take your time over it. You get a record, you can print it, if you make a mistake you can go back to it."

"If you get too many letters then you have the physical aspect of that. But you can save emails into a file and they don't get lost."

"Unlike post, as soon as you send it you have a timestamp."

Email – dislikes

These are the things that participants said they disliked about email.

Might not have access to email or know how to use it

Technology and internet can be unreliable

Concerns about security

Emails can 'get lost'

Sent and received notifications not always available

Seems less important compared to a letter

"People can't afford internet or laptops or computers."

"It isn't feasible for people who don't have computer skills."

Web chat – likes

These are the things that participants said they liked about web chat.

Quick, direct, 'real time' help	Available when other communication methods are not
Can save a record of the conversation	Reduces travel and costs

"I like web chat because you can get an answer and speak to someone very quickly."

"You can do screen captures and record the conversations."

"I think web chat is brilliant, for people who can't get out of the house, who can't write or struggle."

Web chat – dislikes

These are the things that participants said they disliked about web chat.
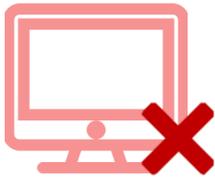
Might not have access to technology or the internet or know how to use it	Might not be chatting to the 'right person'
Can feel impersonal	Can't see or hear who you are chatting to

"You are running the risk of getting through to a generic person – you may get half a dozen people that specialise in something but web chat just goes in a circle of who's available."

"Can't see who you're talking to."

Video call / Skype – likes

These are the things that participants said they liked about video call.
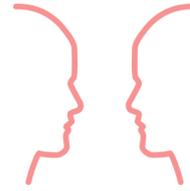
Convenient	A form of 'face to face', can see face and body language
Feels more personal	Reduces travel and costs

"It stops you being passed over from person to person like you would on a phone."

"I use skype because of my hearing. I can see body language, it helps me a lot."

"You don't need to leave the house."

Video call / Skype – dislikes

These are the things that participants said they disliked about video call.
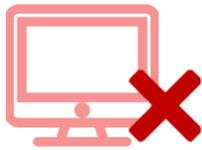
Might not have access to technology or the internet or know how to use it

May not be compatible with assistive technology

Concerns about security
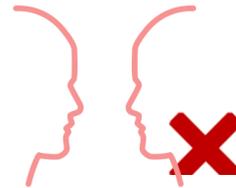
Not truly face to face

"I'm a private person. For me, I don't need the whole world seeing what I'm doing at the other end of the phone. Some days I am not comfortable presenting myself to someone."

"Can't see who you're talking to."

""Not everyone has access to a computer."

Getting help with a benefit application

Over eight in ten respondents (83 per cent) said that they had needed help with a benefit application in the past.

What help was needed for

Just under eight in ten respondents (78 per cent) said they needed help knowing what to write on the application form. Over half (52 per cent) said they needed help understanding the application form.

Half of respondents (50 per cent) said they needed help because their disability or health condition makes filling in forms difficult.

Around four in ten (39 per cent) said they needed emotional support when doing the application.

Who helped

Over half of respondents said a support organisation such as Citizens Advice Bureau or Welfare Rights helped them.

Around one third (34 per cent) said a friend or family member helped them.

How helpful the support was

Overall, nine in ten respondents (90 per cent) said the support they received with the application was helpful or very helpful, with two thirds (66 per cent) saying it was 'very helpful'.
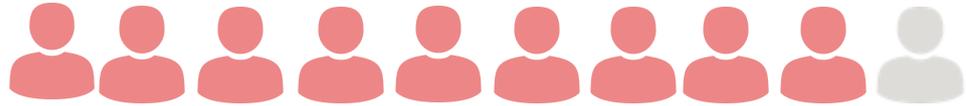
7 per cent rated the support as 'not so helpful' or 'not at all helpful.'

We asked respondents to tell us more about their experience of getting help with an application form.

Most respondents said they needed help understanding and writing the application form and that the support they received was positive.

"The advisor was able to explain the question, giving examples, this helped me realise what the question was actually asking and made it relevant (or not) to me so I could better formulate an answer."

This help gave some respondents peace of mind that their application form was completed correctly.

For others, talking through the application form allowed them to recognise the impact of their health condition or disability on their daily lives.

"Sometimes I'd forget to mention things as it's just part of my normal life, not thinking of the huge differences between my everyday life and those without disabled children."

Some respondents said that those who gave practical help with an application form also provided emotional support.

"Relieved feelings of overwhelming fear, panic and isolation, and the inability to fill in application."

Some respondents had a less positive experience because they struggled to get correct help when they needed it, felt they were not listened to, or found it difficult to talk about personal details with someone they did not know.

"The first time I asked for help it was there. This time there was no help and found it very difficult to fill in."

"It is difficult to speak about some personal parts of my illness with someone at CAB or similar whom I have not met before."

"An advocate I used - I was hoping would help with understanding what was meant by certain questions - but they didn't explain them - just told me they could only write what I said, but that didn't help me understand."
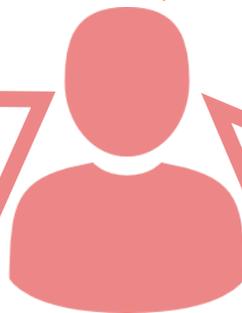
"Basically the lady who helped me to complete the form did not listen to my needs and what I was telling her. She put down what she thought and this led to me being turned down for PIP."

Getting help

We asked respondents if they have always been able to get help with a benefit application form when they need it.

Over half of respondents (54 per cent) said yes.

Over one third (36 per cent) said no.

We asked respondents to tell us more about why they have not always been able to get help with an application form.

The most common reason given was availability of help.

Many respondents said the support organisations they contacted for help were often very busy. It was difficult to get an appointment in the time needed to submit their application.

Long waiting times and short deadlines on application forms were also made worse by difficulty travelling. This was mentioned particularly in small towns and rural areas. The hours organisations are available was also raised as a barrier.

"Citizens Advice have to help so many people that the short deadline is past before they can give you an appointment. It's hard to keep appointments as they're often based far from where I live and I may not be well enough to travel."

This was especially a problem for respondents with mobility issues. A few respondents described problems with the accessibility of support organization venues.

"I've not always been able to physically access a location where I can get help."

Some respondents said they have not always been able to get help with an application form because they did not know that they could ask for help or did not know where to go.

Finding the right organisation to help was also raised as a barrier.

"I didn't know I could get help."

"I didn't know where to go or who to ask."

"Passed around, money support workers, welfare rights workers, citizens advice workers, money advisory workers, advocacy workers, housing workers. Difficult to know the route to take."

"Time, distance, not knowing who to ask, limited appointments available, mental health, physical health."

Online information videos

We asked respondents their thoughts on Social Security Scotland providing information about benefits in video format, including how helpful they thought they would be.

Just under six in ten respondents (58 per cent) thought that the idea of information about Social Security Scotland in video format would be helpful.
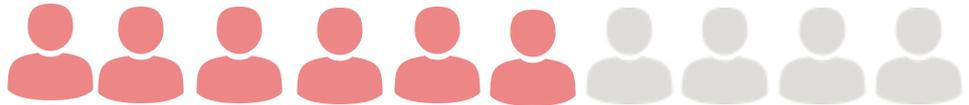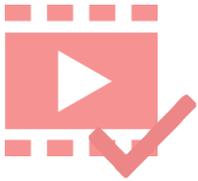
14 per cent did not think this would be helpful.

Just under three in ten (28 per cent) respondents said it would be neither helpful nor unhelpful.

Why video would be helpful

The most common response was that respondents felt information in video is easier to understand and remember than written text.

> "Sometimes it is easier to absorb, and remember, information from a video rather than just reading it."

Some respondents said that they thought that information in video format would feel more 'personal'.

> "It would certainly help as I do believe it would show a human face to something which can be quite daunting."

Many respondents said that information in video format may be less tiring on their physical and mental health than written information.

> "Some people aren't good at taking in the written word especially if on strong medication or have certain medical conditions or in pain."

Many respondents also said information in video format would be helpful because they would be able to watch and re-watch them at any time or place.

"This could be watched, stopped at something I found difficult, rewound and played again to help me understand. It can be watched several times to make sure I get it right."

Some respondents said that any information about Social Security Scotland's benefits and services would be helpful.

Why video would not be helpful

Some respondents said that they personally found written information easier to understand, faster to take in, or easier to refer back to.

A few respondents felt that video format may make it difficult to find relevant information.

Other respondents explained that information in video format would not be helpful to them due to their disability or health condition. Some respondents described having difficulties concentrating and remembering information.

A few respondents felt that online information videos could be 'patronising' and 'impersonal'.

What information would be useful in video

Most respondents said they would find the following useful:
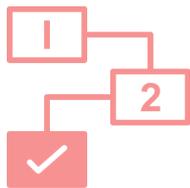
A video explaining each benefit

A video explaining how a face to face assessment will work

A video explaining how to apply

A video explaining how decisions are made on applications

A video explaining redetermination and appeals

A video explaining how to notify Social Security Scotland about a change of circumstances

Respondents also suggested it would be useful to have videos explaining:

- what the application questions are asking and an example of what the answer should be
- how some benefits are linked to other benefits
- what reasonable adjustments are available
- who has access to personal medical information
- different stages of the application process

What's Next?

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

These findings will be used to inform and develop a wide range of areas and services across Social Security Scotland, including the following next steps:

Different ways to communicate with us

We are designing our services so that as many people as possible can access our services where and how they want.

This means we are giving people different ways to contact us for information and to make claims. This includes online, by telephone and post. When our local delivery service is available, clients will be able to ask for a face to face meeting. The findings in this report will help us make sure we have the right communication methods in place at the right time for clients.

Application forms

We will continue to do user testing on application forms for each benefit that Social Security Scotland is responsible for so we make them as easy to understand as possible.

Use of information videos

We will undertake further research and user testing on the use of videos as another way of sharing information.

This report is available on the Scottish Government Publications Website
(http://www.gov.scot/Publications/Recent)