

## **Social Security Experience Panels: Benefit Take-up**

### **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 joined the Experience Panels when they started in 2017. 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 research conducted with Experience Panel members on the subject of benefit take-up. The research asked participants about their previous experiences of accessing the benefits system. It also asked what Social Security Scotland can do to make sure that everyone who is entitled to a benefit can access it.

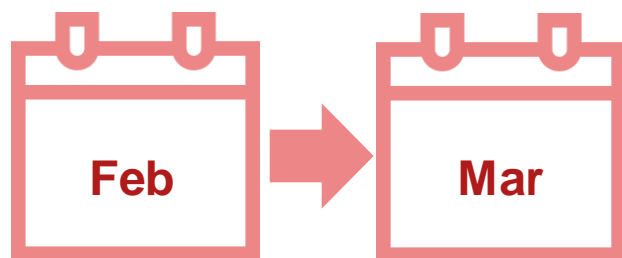


**11**  
focus  
groups



**1**  
interview

The research took place between:



**2020**

**39**

people took part



**8**

locations

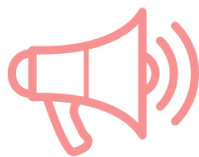
## The research explored views on:



Finding out about  
benefits



Approaching an  
organisation for  
information



Promoting Social  
Security Scotland  
benefits



Reasons people think  
twice about applying



Challenging stigma



Other barriers to taking  
up benefits

## Finding out about benefits

We asked participants how they had found out about benefits in the past. Participants agreed that there were a number of ways that people find out about benefits.



Participants described a number of ways that they had found information about the benefit system. These included through:



Internet search engines and government websites



Online chat forums



Support from welfare rights groups and specialist charities



Speaking to people they knew



Newspapers, television, social media

“I usually head to the government websites to see what is official being said. Then I go to independently run websites to see if they have an opinion.”

“The internet is the primary thing for me. A lot of what I do is running searches and findings random message forums to see what others are saying.”

“I’ve used so many sources of information. Third Sector charities. The Council. The NHS. Community psychiatric nurses, GPs, Health visitors and practice nurses sometimes pass on information too.”

“But information is not always advertised, so you have to find it yourself by word of mouth or just meeting people.”

## Unaware of certain benefits



Participants described a range of experiences where they had been **unaware of different benefits** that they were entitled to.



Participants said this was the case for a wide range of benefits including disability and carer benefits, and Winter Fuel Payments.



Participants described how they had **discovered specific benefits by chance**.



Some said they had difficult experiences of **having to learn about the benefits system later in life.**



Many said they **did not have access to the right information.**



Others said that they had been **overwhelmed by too much information.**

“It’s like being parachuted into an unknown land. From my experience, it’s just not clear where to go. You start to try, you go to one place and get some information from there. Then you go to another. But I didn’t find any pathways where I could move logically. This was really difficult as I was really not well.”

“It’s a maze of dead ends and false information. It’s a complete mess for somebody who has a chronic pain and autism.”

## Approaching an organisation for information

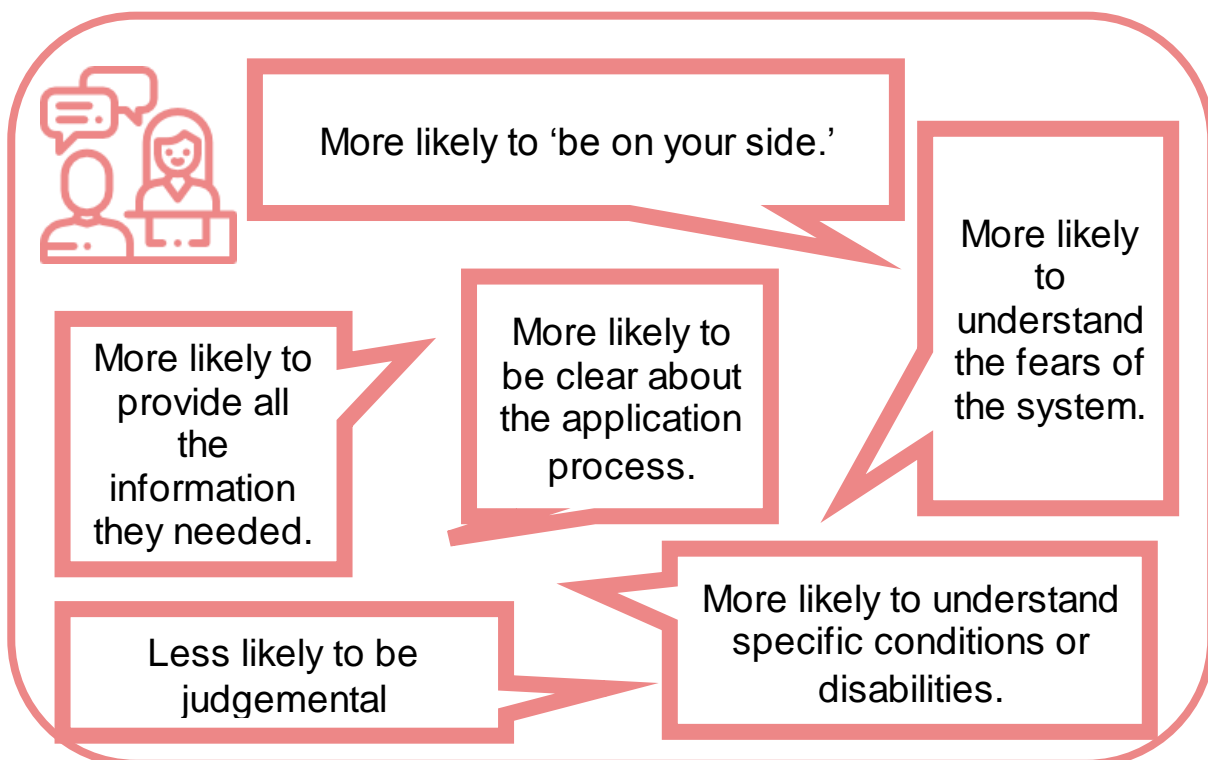


We then asked participants whether they had found **some organisations to be more approachable than others.**



Participants generally agreed that **independent charities or organisations** were more approachable than government sources.

**Charities and independent charities** were thought to be more approachable for a number of reasons. Participants thought they were:



“With them, you trust that what you say will not go any further. It’s non-judgemental. It’s to do with trusting people and them not judging you.”



There was a shared view of **‘getting away’ from official organisations**. Participants said that it was difficult to have an honest conversation about a personal situation with a government official.

“You want to get as far away as possible from the benefits organisations. You just want to be in the hands of the people who fight things for you.”



Participants described concerns that conversations with government officials could get them in **trouble with social services or the justice system**.

“One of the most important things is reassuring people that claiming one benefit won’t result into wider enquiries by social services or the police. For example, if someone has cannabis, they shouldn’t feel afraid to apply to social security. Social Security Scotland have to understand that people are frightened by a ‘big brother’ government.”



Participants generally talked about the **importance of the support provided by staff**.



“My experience has generally been determined by the individual I have dealt with. Some staff want to help but they can’t. It really depends on the person.”



Participants agreed that it was important to have an **ongoing relationship with a staff member who was familiar with their situation.**

## Promoting Social Security Scotland benefits



We asked participants what Social Security Scotland could do to raise awareness about its benefits.



Some participants said Social Security Scotland could put **more leaflets, posters and advertisements in places that people visit.**

Participants suggested various locations to promote Social Security Scotland benefits. These included:



**Hospitals and GP surgeries**



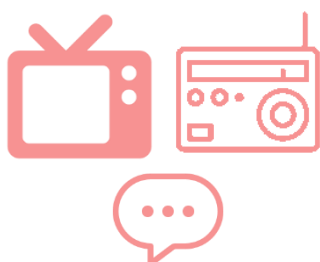
## **Workplaces**



## **Schools and nurseries**



## **Local charities**



## **Television, radio, and social media.**

“It needs to be in more than one place. You’ve got to do radio, online and newspapers for example.”

“It would be good if Scottish Social Security engaged with local charities. They would take information and pass it outwards to the people that trust them.”



Others said that picking up a leaflet or seeing an advert might give people more awareness of a benefit. However, **it might not give them enough confidence to apply for it.**

## Improving the language and tone of public information

Many participants shared views about the **language and tone of the information** that promoted Social Security Scotland benefits.



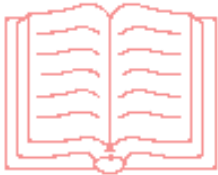
These participants spoke about the opportunity of creating a **new brand of Social Security Scotland**. They felt a new brand could provide a clear and positive message.

“The Scottish system should try to rebrand. It should try to show they are in this new entity and what a great approach they have. The more you can distance yourself from DWP, the more people will approach you for help.”



Some said that **clear and kind language** would help Social Security Scotland **win trust** of those who might consider applying.

“I think the tone of the wording matters. If something comes across really bluntly, for me it’s like a knife to through my heart.”



There were also suggestions that information could be presented using **pictures or cartoons**. It was felt that this was likely to reach younger audiences.

## **Reasons to think twice about applying for benefits**

We asked participants whether they had ever thought twice about applying for a benefit that they were entitled to.

Participants described a number of factors that had made them think twice about applying for a benefit



Many said it was hard to **fully recognise and accept that they needed additional support**. Some felt that applying for a benefit meant admitting personal limitations both to oneself and society.

“The first thing you have to do is face up to your own disability. So it’s confronting the fact that you aren’t the same as a healthy individual of the same age. It’s a personal thing that makes it difficult in regards to your own identity.”



Other participants said that they had to **build up courage before applying or challenging a decision**. Building up courage was particularly stated by participants who were making applications with a **hidden disability**.

“There’s an awareness that it’s not straightforward. You know it is a long process. The thing that stops me then is all the negative experiences that other people have had.”



Others said they had concerns about claiming benefits and **their privacy**. Some felt that once they were claiming a benefit, they would feel like they were **being watched**.

“Everyone is watching their backs on benefits. It’s not a comfortable existence in the benefits system, you’re constantly watching in all directions. You don’t want people around you to know, you don’t want to go places.”



Participants also felt that **stigma and social pressure** had made them less likely to apply for what they were entitled to. Many participants said that they did not want **judged by others for taking ‘handouts.’**

“That perceived stigma is also why most people who apply for something wait until they need it rather than when they’re eligible.”

“Pride. For somebody like myself or other accountants, lawyers, they don’t want to ask for a “hand out”. I don’t know how prevalent this is in stopping people from applying but it delays the process.”

## Experiences of Stigma

We asked participants where they had experienced social pressure and stigma about the benefits system. Participants talked about a number of different ways in they had experienced stigma. These included:



Television programmes



Newspapers



Social media



Government and politicians



Neighbours, friends and family



It was felt that **television programmes** and **newspapers** told negative stories about people on benefits. Participants felt that certain media focussed on people who were trying to **overuse or decieve the benefits system**.

“When they make these programmes around benefit fraud, it gives the perception that everyone is on benefits is fraudulent. When in actual fact is it only a small minority of people.”



Other participants said that some **politicians** increased negative attitudes towards the benefits system. Several talked about the damage of political campaigns that focussed on the welfare state.

“There are politicians out there who are demonising disabled people.”



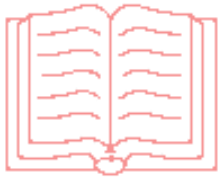
Others spoke about **discrimination towards disabled people in communities**. Some talked about wrongful fraud accusations in local neighbourhoods. Others discussed how strangers in their local area could say unpleasant things to them on the street.

“I was walking along the road and a couple of guys followed me and shouted ‘scrounger’. You get people screaming all kinds of things at you. I’ve had people say ‘people like you should be dead’, amongst other things.”

## **Ways for Social Security Scotland to challenge stigma**

We asked participants about how they would want Social Security Scotland to challenge stigma.





Many talked about **telling positive stories about the impact of benefits**. They wanted case studies to show how benefits are essential to support normal people's lives.



Some felt stories could help **address negative perceptions of people who claimed benefits**. These participants suggested using stories to challenge stereotypes around hidden disabilities and the level of benefit fraud.

"I like little stories that charities do about hidden disabilities. I think positive stories are really important and just making people aware about how bad some people's situations are."



Others wanted stories about how benefits were **enablers**. They called for positive stories about how benefits allowed vulnerable people to **support their own business** or **contribute to the local economy**.

"We need messages that benefits are enablers. They enable people to contribute financially, or spend money that supports local businesses."



Other participants thought that Social Security Scotland could use case studies of more **high profile figures** who had used the benefits system.

“If there are higher profile people or celebrities mobilising positive stories about the benefits system it would be more effective. Mental health is an example of this as there are more people being more open about it. It should be normalised.”



Participants said it was important to **educate people about the benefits system**. They wanted the public to have a better understanding about disabled people. Several said they wanted the public to know how the system was funded.

“The reality of living on benefits, not these contrived shows, should be taught to every child in school. The reality of living on benefits is completely different.”

## **Improving application and assessments processes**

We asked participants if there were any other things that had made it difficult for them to access what they were entitled to. Many spoke about challenges with **application and assessment processes**.



Participants agreed it was **stressful to complete the application forms accurately**. They also described how it was difficult to answer certain questions on their own.

“The design of the forms is setting you up to go it alone.”

“The forms are designed to trick you. I think they are. They say fill in this, then move to another box round the corner.”



It was felt that Social Security Scotland needed to **support those who would be looking at the forms for the first time**.



Participants said that it was **very difficult having a health assessment**. Some said that they were filled with dread at the thought of being assessed. A number of participants said that they had **not been assessed by someone with the correct medical expertise**.

“The horror of the assessments that really gets to me I think. The horror of the brown envelope when you see it on your doorstep. And it’s all because of how horrible the assessments can be.”



Participants felt that Social Security Scotland assessors should be able to look at a client's situation and **signpost them to a range of benefits.**

“During an initial assessment, the assessor should be able to look at the person's situation and identify what they are eligible for. The assessor must be active and opposed to the assessors for DWP where they only deal with the one thing. They should look at the whole situation and give you the right options.”

## Geographical barriers



Some participants said that living in rural areas had made it difficult them to access services.



They described how they had been isolated in rural areas that were **not well connected by transport.**



Some said that rural areas were **not well connected to the internet.**



Others spoke about being more hesitant to seek support because of stigma in rural areas.

“Geography and access really impacts on how people find out about information. Public transport causes massive issues and drives people into impossible situations.”

## Supporting the most vulnerable

Some spoke about how it is harder for particular groups of people to access the support that they were entitled to. They spoke about:



**People who are homeless**



**People who do not have access to the internet**



**People who were experiencing abuse**

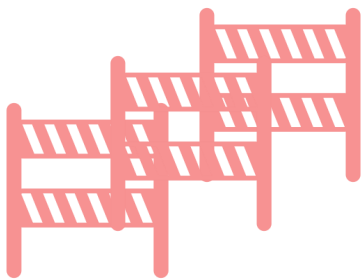
## The combination of many barriers



At the end of the focus group sessions, we asked participants what was the most significant barrier they had faced.



Some participants spoke about **the fear and the courage** that was needed to approach and challenge the Government. Others spoke about **application forms and assessments**. **Stigma** from other people and society were also mentioned.



However, many participants said there was **not one single barrier** that had impacted them more than others. They suggested that there were **combination of many barriers** which had stopped or delayed them from accessing benefits.



It was felt that these barriers '**piled on top**' of **each other**. Participants said that Social Security Scotland needed to address all of these different barriers at the same time.

“There are moments where it all piles on top of you. It’s not a single thing but it’s the fact that you have multiple factors. It feels like something else comes to shut you down when you’ve gone through a barrier.”

## Next steps



The Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland will use these findings to make sure that people know what benefits these are entitled to.



Scottish Government will also work with stakeholder organisations and local authorities to reach a diverse range of people and support them to apply for relevant benefits.



Staff will be trained to treat everyone with dignity, fairness and respect. The findings from this research will help with inclusive training materials.



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