

EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security: Effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on communication preferences

Background



This is a summary of a research project which took place from January to April 2021. It looked at the effect of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on how people want to communicate with Social Security Scotland. The research was with Experience and Client Panel members.

Experience Panels



Social Security
**Experience
Panels**

The Experience Panels were established in 2017 to help design a social security system that works for the people of Scotland. Members have experience of at least one of the benefits delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that has or will come to Scotland.

Client Panels



The Client Panels started in 2020. They are made up of Social Security Scotland clients from across Scotland. Client Panel members share their experiences and opinions on how Social Security Scotland works.

The COVID-19 pandemic



The **COVID-19 pandemic** has affected how we live our lives. For this research, we asked participants about their communication before, during and after the pandemic.



For the purposes of the research, 'during the pandemic' was the period starting from **1 March 2020**.



Participants were also asked to think about making contact with Social Security Scotland **once the pandemic was no longer a serious risk to public health**. Each participant could think for themselves when this might be. This included what restrictions on everyday life, if any, might exist.

About the research

This summary sets out the findings of the research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication preferences.

This research was jointly run with the Experience and Client Panels. It was the first Client Panels research activity.



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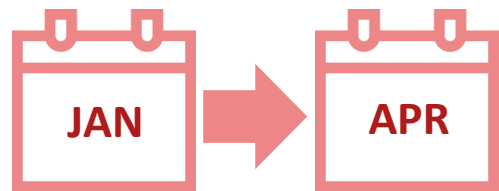
Interviews



484

Survey responses

The research took place in



2021

The research explored views on:



Contact with Social Security Scotland since March 2020.



How the pandemic may have affected how people like to communicate.



Views on talking to Social Security Scotland via video call.



Views on meeting Social Security Scotland in person.

About the survey participants



420

Experience Panels members took part.

64

Client Panels members took part.

The participants identified as:



66%

Women



32%

Men



82%

Most lived in an urban location.



18%

Around a fifth lived in a rural location.



53%

Over half said they were carers.



78%

Most had a disability or long-term health condition.



3%

were from an ethnic minority.

About the interview participants

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview.

41 interviews carried out



25

Client Panels
members

16

Experience
Panels members

The participants identified as:



56%

Women



37%

Men



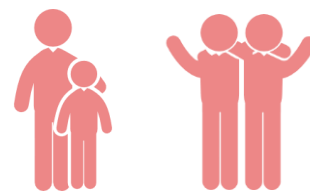
78%

Most lived in an
urban location.



22%

A fifth lived in a
rural location.



37%

Around a third said
they were carers.



44%

Just less than half had a disability
or long-term health condition.



5%

were from an ethnic
minority.

Contacting Social Security Scotland during the pandemic

Around four in ten (40 per cent) of survey respondents said they had contact with Social Security Scotland during the pandemic. Some respondents may have reported contact with DWP when answering this question.



Most (83 per cent) said they were happy with their interaction.



“I have always been able to contact Social Security Scotland through web chat or telephone and speak to an adviser very quickly. This has been before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. Customer service always great.” (survey respondent)

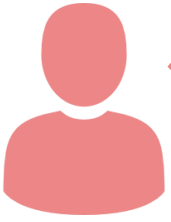


Around one in five (18 percent) said there was something they were unhappy about.



Interview participants who were unhappy about something said they had difficulty in finding information or help.

One participant had to make a lots of calls to fix a problem. One participant felt unsure about the amount they had received. Another participant said they didn't receive the information they needed from Social Security Scotland.



“Lack of communication. I first applied for the Young Carer Grant in November 2020 and I received confirmation but the next communication I got was January 2021 and it was to advise me I could apply for the thing I already had applied for. At this moment I am still waiting for them to tell me when or if I need to send in any more documents.” (survey respondent and interview participant with experience of Young Carer Grant)

Submitting evidence about a claim



Just less than a third (28 per cent) of respondents who had been in touch with Social Security Scotland during the pandemic said they had submitted evidence.



Most (74 per cent) said they had no trouble with the process for submitting evidence.

Responses about submitting evidence covered experiences with both Social Security Scotland and DWP.



Many said that sending **paper evidence** can be difficult. Not having access to a printer or a scanner to make photocopies can make the process hard. Delays with mail can also cause problems.



Many said **uploading evidence online** was quicker and easier than providing paper evidence.



Interview participants who had used the Social Security Scotland online evidence portal said the upload process was straightforward. One noted that the service should continue beyond the pandemic.



“[Evidence upload] would still be a good option after the pandemic as well, it was easier and can’t get lost in the mail.” (interview participant)

Getting in touch with Social Security Scotland before, during and the after the pandemic

Most respondents said they preferred a mix of contact methods for getting in touch for different reasons. Only a small number said they would use the same method for any reason.



Across all reasons for getting in touch, **around four in ten (40 per cent)** of survey respondents preferred **telephone**. This was true before, during and after the pandemic.



Around one in ten (10 per cent) preferred meeting in person across the six reasons for getting in touch. This stayed about the same before and after the pandemic. There was a slight decrease during the pandemic.



Across all reasons, around **15 per cent of respondents** said they preferred **post**. This remained roughly the same before, during and after the pandemic.



Before, during and after the pandemic, **around half of respondents** said they wanted to make an application using **an online form**.



During and after the pandemic, **around a fifth (20 per cent) of respondents** said they would get in touch **via web chat**.



Around a quarter (17 per cent) said they preferred to receive updates about the progress of an application via **text message (SMS)**.



Around 5 per cent of respondents said **video call** would be their preferred method **after the pandemic**.



Only around 1 per cent of respondents indicated a preference for **social media** for advice and information, progress updates or urgent situations.

Reason for getting in touch

**Top preferred method
after the pandemic**



Advice and general information



Telephone



Applying for a benefit



Online form



Monitoring the progress of your application



Telephone



Challenge a decision



Post



An urgent situation relating to your application



Telephone



Advising a change in circumstances



Online form

Views on different methods for getting in touch

Telephone



Many said that the telephone gave callers the chance to fully **explain their circumstances**.



Some also said that phone calls were a good way to get **quick answers** or make contact for the **first time**.

“If urgent, [I] might need a telephone number to get in touch with someone that day.” (interview participant)



“Still prefer phone calls. Phone calls are [my] first option. I like that someone would immediately answer my enquiries.” (interview participant)



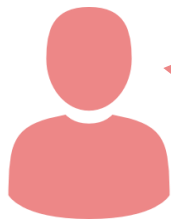
During the pandemic, some respondents said that their preferences had changed to include more phone calls as they were able to meet fewer people in person.



Some said that they had experienced long waiting times on calls to organisations during the pandemic. Some said they would now consider different ways of getting in touch.

Post

Panel members said letters were helpful as they created a **record of all information** sent and received. Some said it was easier to **explain personal circumstances** in detail, or **include other documents**, on paper forms or via letter.



“The kind of general communication...information giving I think I would continue like to have a hard copy like a letter, sometimes people need to see it.”
(interview participant)



Some panel members said that delays in Royal Mail's service during the pandemic had caused problems.

“Due to the pandemic and restrictions, the postal service is no longer reliable enough to have things done by post.”
(survey respondent)



One respondent said that Social Security Scotland should consider the environmental impact of sending letters.

Text messages

Panel members said text messages were a helpful way to receive **updates and reminders**.



“Text messages are always good, you get reminder text messages from different places, that’s really handy!”
(interview participant)



Two interview participants said they had heard a lot about text message scams. So they felt wary of communicating in this way.

“At the moment there are so many scams...to be honest, if I get a text message now I would be very wary, even emails now I am wary because I just don’t know where they’re coming from.” (interview participant)



Online forms



Feedback said online forms could be **quicker** to complete and **more accessible** than paper forms.

“Then there’s no having to fill it with my terrible handwriting because of my eyesight. Then there’s also getting someone to go out and post it for you. [Online] you can make it the font the size you want on the computer...it’s sent direct and cuts out the chance of it going missing in the post.” (interview participant)



There were also suggestions for other types of online communication.



Panel members said it should be possible to get in touch via **email**.



Participants liked email because it provided a **record of interactions**.

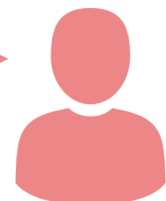


Some said email lets them **keep up-to-date** with important information.



Some said email gave them space to **explain personal circumstances or questions**.

“My preferred contact method would be by email because then I have a record of what had been discussed / decided. Phone conversations are not much use to anyone with short attention spans or poor memory, which is why a printed record is best for them.” (survey respondent)



There were also suggestions for a Social Security Scotland app and a platform to monitor the progress of applications.

Web chat

Panel members said web chat could be a good way to get **quick answers** and find out more **detailed information**.



Some participants said that web chat was a good option, as long as clients received **personalised replies** and not pre-programmed responses.

“Same with urgent [situations], web chat might be ok sometimes if I could be sure who I was talking to and it wasn't either a scripted bot or someone talking to 5 people at once.” (survey respondent)



One interview participant said the Social Security Scotland web chat service was helpful and convenient. They were pleased with the quick response. A survey participant who had used the service said they hoped it would remain an option after the pandemic.

“I hope you keep the web chat in the future as it's so useful.” (survey respondent)



“Having that online chat was preferred, it was a really quick in giving me an answer and I wasn't waiting for ages.” (interview participant)

Social media

Very few respondents said social media would be their preferred way to get in touch with Social Security Scotland.



Two interview participants said that social media could be a helpful way for Social Security Scotland to provide information.

“If Social Security Scotland had specific Facebook or Instagram groups, they can share their achievements and support on this social media. They can alert people to new services. It would re-assure people in difficult situations.” (interview participant with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods and Carer’s Allowance Supplement)



Change in communication preferences during and after the pandemic



Around a quarter (23 per cent) of survey respondents said that their preferred way to get in touch would be different during the pandemic.



Compared to before the pandemic, **a fifth of respondents (20 per cent)** said their preferences would change once COVID-19 was no longer a serious risk to public health.




Older respondents and respondents with a long-term health condition or disability were more likely to say their preferences would change during or after the pandemic.



Some said they would **prefer more online communication**.



Some said this was because they now felt **more confident** communicating online. Others said they now appreciated the **convenience and effectiveness** of online methods.



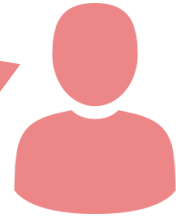
“I have become more comfortable with online web-chat and video calls.”
(survey respondent)

“The internet has been shown that it is extremely useful as meetings have taken place via Zoom for example and as such people did not need to travel.” (interview participant)



Some participants said options for communication should continue to take into account that **not everyone has access to the internet at home**.

“Everything has to be done online. What if you can't afford internet access or don't own a smartphone? People in the area I live in are struggling to eat so internet access isn't a priority and their only other way to access the internet is through the library services and they're all closed.” (survey respondent)

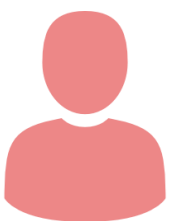


Talking to Social Security Scotland via video call



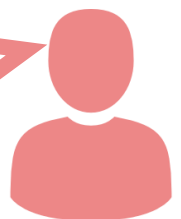
Some respondents said their experiences during the pandemic meant **they now found video calls a helpful way to get in touch.**

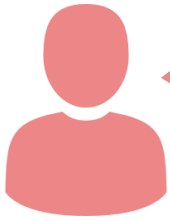
Participants had different ideas about what purposes were best suited to video call. These included: for all contacts; for advice and general information; or only when it was appropriate to the situation.



“For a first time person, there’s so much information it’s quite hard to sift through so I think pre-application would be a good starting point [for video calls] to give people good, personalised information.” (interview participant)

“To be honest, I think all the time. I think I feel better speaking to a person and seeing them rather than speaking to a stranger on the phone and sometimes I think on the phone you don’t understand the problems in the same way as seeing somebody.” (interview participant)





“Preferred over the phone as my mum had just passed, so with teary-eyes and blurriness you know, I think it would be based on the situation...I wouldn't have wanted to make the person feel awkward.” (interview participant with experience of Funeral Support Payment)



Some panel members said video calls could replace meeting in person while restrictions were in place or from now on.



Almost all interview participants said they would **expect Social Security Scotland to arrange video calls in advance**. Participants said this could be via letter, phone call or email.



There were a range of suggestions for information that should be provided in advance. These included what would be discussed and how long the call might last. Other suggestions were for a list of documents or information to prepare before the call.



“Name of the person I'm meeting with as this alone can reduce anxiety levels slightly. A small photo of the person I'm meeting with on the letter.” (survey respondent)

People who took part in the research had experience with a variety of different video call platforms. **Most respondents (45 per cent)** said they were happy to use any platform. **Two in five (40 per cent)** preferred Zoom.



Many participants said the main benefit of video calls was being able to see the person you're talking to. Others said that not everyone is comfortable using their camera.

“It's nice to see a face when you are speaking to somebody, it makes it more personal in a way, you are not speaking to a stranger on a phone, you are looking at somebody you are speaking to them, it's more like, you don't know them but it's easier.” (interview participant)



“Having both the cameras on but the person having the option to turn it off...some people don't like that. [Someone with] anxiety or body dysmorphia then maybe they don't always want to go in front of a camera.” (interview participant)

Some mentioned different features that were important when using video calls. These included being easy to use and access, having a chat function, being able to share documents or record the call.



Participants didn't raise specific security concerns about video calls with Social Security Scotland.

“I wouldn’t expect it to be in an office full of other people...it [security] wouldn’t really concern me, I know that steps would be taken to ensure your privacy is respected as much as possible.”
(interview participant)



Meeting Social Security Scotland in person



Over three quarters (79 per cent) of respondents said they could be interested in meeting Social Security Scotland in person in the future.

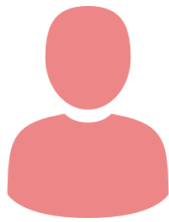


Respondents with a long-term health condition or disability were more likely to say they would be interested in meeting in person.



Over half (56 per cent) of respondents said they would consider either visiting a Social Security Scotland location or arranging a meeting at home.

The majority (67 per cent) said they would only feel comfortable meeting in person once all restrictions related to the pandemic had been lifted.



“I would want the COVID-19 pandemic to be over and things to have returned to as close to normal as they can.” (survey respondent)

One in five (20 per cent) said they would consider in-person meetings when the restrictions in their local area allowed people from different households to mix indoors.



“When COVID-19 infections are very low in my area and many people have been vaccinated.” (survey respondent)

Around one in ten (11 per cent) respondents said they would be happy to meet in person while restrictions remain in place.



Feedback highlighted a range of reasons for getting in touch with Social Security Scotland in person.

Reasons for getting in touch in person included:



to discuss **complex issues**;



to **share documents or evidence**;



to **report problems**;



and to get **extra support** during difficult times.

“Great idea, would be ideal...If that [meeting in person] was available, that would be Plan A.” (interview participant)

“Yes, definitely face to face. English is my second language and it’s easier face to face they can show me clearly [what to do].” (interview participant)



“I think I will continue to use the online and telephone. Phoning about the state of my application. But if it was more complicated I would go in person.” (interview participant)



Some interview **participants with experience of disability benefits** said in person meetings were the best way to carry out **health assessments**.



Most survey respondents said they would want to receive a letter (42 per cent) **or email** (40 per cent) about their visit to a Social Security Scotland location.



Panel members said information before a visit should include details on:



who they will meet;



COVID-19 safety measures in place at the location;



and if **bringing children or someone for support** would be allowed.



“Do you have to be alone or can you bring someone with you to support you and help you understand things and to support you emotionally or mentally?” (interview participant)

COVID-19 safety measures when meeting in person

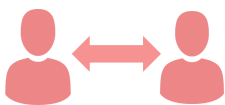
Buildings



More than three quarters (79 per cent) of respondents said that while restrictions are in place, there should be **access to hand washing facilities**.



77 per cent said that **hand sanitiser** should be available.



Over half (55 per cent) said **physical distancing** should be maintained while restrictions remain in place.



80% of respondents said **that from now on, staff and clients should wear a face covering**.



Over half said there should be **screens or shields** for example, at desks (58 per cent).



Suggestions for other safety measures included: **spaced-out waiting areas**; a **one-way system** for moving around; **sufficient ventilation**; and **regular cleaning**.

“Air flow! There must be better ventilation as otherwise virus particles build up in an environment very quickly. I'd prefer to sit next to an open window and keep my jacket on.”
(survey respondent)



“The venue should be clean, door handles, chairs and tables/desks should be wiped down between customers with disinfectant.”
(survey respondent)



A few respondents said that precautions such as **temperature checks, tests, and proof of vaccination status** could also be used.

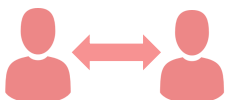
Home visits



Face coverings were the most frequently mentioned precaution for home visits. Other precautions suggested were:



hand sanitiser or hand washing;



maintaining physical distance;

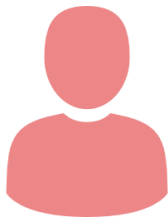


and suitable ventilation, such as opening windows.

“If Social Security staff were to visit during COVID-19 or in the first year after restrictions relax I think PPE mask and shield would be appropriate for staff.”
(survey respondent)



The majority of survey respondents and interview participants said they would still expect some safety measures to be in place after restrictions were eased or removed.



“After the pandemic passes, it could be beneficial to still wear face coverings when meeting face-to-face.”
(survey respondent)

Next Steps



Research with Experience and Client Panels will continue to shape Scotland's social security system.



The findings will shape the design and delivery of local delivery services. These services provide help and support to clients in their local areas across Scotland.



Preferences and views about video calls will shape the development of the Social Security Scotland video call service.



The research will also be helpful to make Social Security Scotland work in ways that prioritise the needs and wellbeing of clients and staff.



The findings will also be used to plan how clients apply for Adult Disability Payment from Social Security Scotland in the future.



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