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Social Security - Client and Experience Panels research - Effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on communication preferences



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Introduction

From January to April 2021, Client Panel and Experience Panel members took part in research to explore the effect of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on communication preferences. In total, 484 members across both Panels chose to complete a survey exploring this topic. Follow-up interviews were carried out with 41 panel members. This report details the findings and key themes that emerged from this work.

Summary

This report presents findings on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the ways people prefer to communicate with organisations like Social Security Scotland. Most respondents said they preferred a mix of communication methods for getting in touch for different reasons. Only a small number said they would use the same method to get in touch regardless of the purpose. There was limited overall change in preferences before, during and after the pandemic. Among those who did indicate a change, preferences for online communication increased.

The sections below provide more information on the key results from each of the research themes.

Contacting Social Security Scotland during the pandemic

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

The majority (83 per cent) said they were happy with their interaction. Around one fifth (18 per cent) said there was something they were unhappy about. Half of these respondents said they considered making a complaint.

Interview participants who were unhappy with an aspect of their interaction said they had difficulty in finding information or help. One participant said they had to make repeated calls to resolve an issue. Other experiences included questioning the amount they had received and feeling unsure about how to raise a complaint with Social Security Scotland.

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 experienced no trouble with the process.

Participants and respondents who discussed submitting evidence as part of a benefit claim included experiences with both Social Security Scotland and DWP. Many said that sending paper evidence can often be problematic. Difficulties included having no access to a printer or scanner to make photocopies and delays with mail.

Many said uploading evidence online was quicker and more convenient 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 remain beyond the pandemic.

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

Around 40 per cent of survey respondents said they preferred the telephone before, during and after the pandemic. This was across six different reasons for getting in touch with Social Security Scotland. Telephone was the most preferred way to get in touch for: advice and general information; monitoring the progress of an application; and for urgent situations.

Across all purposes for getting in touch, around one in ten (10 per cent) said they preferred meeting in person. This remained about the same before and after the pandemic. There was a slight decrease in this preference during the pandemic.

Preference for post across all purposes remained roughly the same before, during and after the pandemic at around 15 per cent of respondents. Post or paper form was the most preferred way to challenge a decision made about an application.

Before, during and after the pandemic, around half of respondents said their preferred way to make an application was via an online form. During and after the pandemic, online form was also the preferred way to advise a change in circumstances.

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. Video call was the third most preferred method

for getting advice and general information and for making contact in an urgent situation.

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

Attitudes about different methods for getting in touch

Telephone

Many said that telephone communication gave callers the chance to fully explain their circumstances. Feedback also said that phone calls were a good way to get quick answers or make initial contact. During the pandemic, some respondents said that their preferences had changed to include more calls due to restrictions on meeting in person. Some said that they had experienced long wait times on calls to organisations during the pandemic. Some said they would now consider alternative ways of getting in touch.

Post

People who preferred paper-based communication 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 supplementary documents, via paper forms or letters. Some feedback said that delays in Royal Mail's service during the pandemic had caused difficulties. One respondent said that Social Security Scotland should consider the environmental impact of sending letters.

Text messages

People who preferred text messages said they were a helpful way to receive updates and reminders. Two interview participants said they had heard a lot about scams via text message and felt wary of communicating in this way.

Online forms

Those who preferred online forms said they could be quicker to complete and more accessible than paper forms. There were also suggestions for other types of online communication. Feedback said it should be possible to get in touch via email. Participants liked email because it provided a record of interactions and gave them space to explain personal circumstances or questions. There were also suggestions for a Social Security Scotland app and a platform to monitor the progress of applications.

Web chat

People who liked web chat said it 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 when it provided personalised replies and not pre-programmed responses. One interview participant said the Social Security Scotland web chat service was helpful and convenient and was pleased with the quick response. A survey participant who had used the service said they hoped it would remain an option after the pandemic.

Social media

Very few (1 per cent) survey respondents said social media was, or 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.

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.

Those who indicated a change during or after the pandemic said they would prefer more online communication. Some said this was because they had gained confidence communicating online or recognised the convenience of online methods. Some participants without online access at home said options for communication should continue to take into account that not everyone has access to the internet.

Talking to Social Security Scotland via video call

Some respondents said their experiences during the pandemic meant they now considered 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 interactions; for advice and general information; or only when it was appropriate to the situation. Some feedback said video calls could replace in person interactions 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 including: what would be discussed and

how long the call might last; a list of documents or information to prepare in advance; and instructions about how to join the call.

Across both the survey and interviews, participants mentioned experience with a variety of different 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 a key benefit of video calls was being able to see the person you're talking to. Others said that not everyone might be comfortable using their camera. Some participants mentioned other features that were important to them including: ease of use and access; a chat function; the ability to share documents; and being able to record the call. Participants didn't raise specific security concerns about video calls with Social Security Scotland.

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 communicating 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. One in five (20 per cent) said they would consider in person interactions when the restrictions in their local area allowed people from different households to mix indoors. Around one in ten (11 per cent) respondents said they would be happy to meet in person while restrictions remain in place.

Respondents and participants highlighted a range of reasons for getting in touch with Social Security Scotland in person. These included: to discuss complex issues; to share documents or evidence; to report problems; and to get extra support during difficult times. 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) before visiting a Social Security Scotland location. Feedback said this should include information such as: who they will meet; COVID-19 safety measures in place at the location; and if bringing children or someone for support would be allowed.

COVID-19 safety measures when meeting in person

Buildings

Around three quarters (79 per cent) of respondents said that while restrictions are in place, there should be access to hand washing facilities. A similar number (77 per cent) said hand sanitiser should be available. Over half (55 per cent) said physical distancing should be maintained while restrictions remain in place.

The majority (80 per cent) of respondents said that from now on, staff and clients should wear a face covering. Over half (58 per cent) said there should be screens or shields for example, at desks.

Suggestions for other safety measures included: a one-way system for moving around; sufficient ventilation; and regular cleaning. 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. The majority of survey respondents and interview participants said they would expect some safety measures to remain even after restrictions were eased or removed.

Next steps

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Experience Panels in the design and development of Scotland's social security system. Research with Client Panels will continue to provide insight about clients' experience and support Social Security Scotland's continuous improvement.

Insights about communication preferences and views about meeting Social Security Scotland in person will inform the design and delivery of local delivery services. Views about video calls will inform 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 and deliver the next stage of the design of consultations for Adult Disability Payment.

Background and methodology

This chapter provides background information about the project and outlines the methodology used during the research.

Background

This research was the first Client Panels research activity and was jointly undertaken with the 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.

Established in 2020, the Client Panels are made up of Social Security Scotland clients from across Scotland. Client Panels members share their experiences and opinions on how Social Security Scotland should and is working. Members involved in this project signed up to the Client Panels via the first Social Security Scotland Client Survey which ran in 2020. These Client Panel members have experience of at least one of:

- Best Start Grant / Best Start Foods
- Carer's Allowance Supplement
- Funeral Support Payment
- Young Carer Grant

As a joint project, participants came from both the Client and Experience Panels. This means that this report includes feedback from two groups. First, Client Panel members who have applied for and received one or more

payments from Social Security Scotland. Second, Experience Panel members who have experience of disability and carer benefits that have yet to move to Social Security Scotland.

It is important to note, that the results presented in this report only represent the views of panel members who took part in the project. Results should not be interpreted as generalisable for Social Security Scotland's current or future client base as a whole.

Methodology

Panel members were invited to take part in a survey and interview to explore four key themes:

- **Interactions during the pandemic:** The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on interactions with Social Security Scotland since March 2020. This theme also explored anything the respondent was unhappy with and their experience of submitting supporting evidence.
- **Communication preferences:** How the pandemic may have affected current and future communication preferences.
- **Video calls:** Attitudes towards using video calls to talk to Social Security Scotland.
- **In-person interactions:** Attitudes towards meeting Social Security Scotland in person, either in at a local location or at home.

Research took place in two stages between January and April 2021.

Research comprised: a survey carried out between January and March and follow-up interviews which took place in March and April. Participation in all panels' research is optional. In total, 484 panel members completed the survey and 41 members took part in an interview with a researcher.

Table 1: Participation in the research

	No. of survey respondents	No. of interview participants
Client Panels	64 (23 per cent response rate)	25
Experience Panels	420 (27 per cent response rate)	16
Total	484	41

Survey

All active Experience Panel members were invited to take part in the survey. In total, 420 Experience Panel members chose to complete the survey.¹ This represents a response rate of approximately 27 per cent.

In total, 64 Client Panel members chose to complete the survey, a response rate of 23 per cent. Client Panels members who had experience of receiving Carer's Allowance Supplement but no other Social Security Scotland benefits were not invited to take part in the project. Clients don't submit an application for Carer's Allowance Supplement so are likely to have limited interaction with Social Security Scotland compared to other clients.

Throughout the report, panel members who completed the survey are referred to as survey respondents.

Results shown in the report exclude any respondents who were either filtered out of the question or who left the response blank. Results presented in Figures or tables are intended to show proportions between different answer

¹ 59 Experience Panel members completed the survey twice and one member completed it three times. Only one response per member was included in the analysis. To accomplish this, each set of responses were assigned random numbers and the response(s) with the lowest number was discarded.

options. The number of respondents answering a question is shown in the title of the table as (n). Where results include a small number of blank responses, the number of respondents is shown as (n=approx.)

In open text questions which specifically asked about experiences with Social Security Scotland, some respondents instead described experiences with DWP. In these instances, where it was clear that feedback was about DWP and not Social Security Scotland, these comments were not included in analysis.

Quotations are taken from comments left by respondents in open-text questions and have the label (survey respondent). Edits to spelling and grammar were made as appropriate.

Where possible, information from the survey was matched to demographic information supplied previously by panel members. Linking was not possible where there was missing or unclear information. The following demographic information is included to give context to the findings from the survey.

Two thirds of survey respondents (66 per cent) identified as female. Almost half (47 per cent) were aged 45 to 59. Around 3 per cent of respondents were from a minority ethnic group. Most respondents (78 per cent) had a disability or long-term health condition. Over half of respondents (53 per cent) said they were a carer. Most survey respondents lived in an urban area (82 per cent). Survey respondents had experience of claiming or helping someone else to claim a wide range of benefits. The most common benefit claimed by Experience Panels survey respondents was Personal Independence Payment (76 per cent). Among Client Panels survey respondents, the most common benefit experience was of Best Start Grant/Foods (71 per cent). Further information and demographic information about survey respondents can be found at Annex A.

Potential differences based on characteristics were considered during analysis. The report identifies where there was a large difference between answers from different groups. For example, between respondents living in urban or rural areas. It isn't possible to test whether this reflects a difference between these groups beyond the survey respondents. This is because the survey was not completed by a representative sample of benefits recipients. It is also important to take caution comparing results between groups where the total number of responses is small.

Interviews

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview. In total, 41 interviews were conducted. Throughout the report, panel members who took part in an interview are referred to as interview participants.

All interviews explored communication during the pandemic and likely future preferences. Based on their survey responses, participants were also asked relevant additional questions relating to one or more of the other key research themes.

Quotations from participants are used to illustrate the findings discussed in the report and have the label (interview participant). Edits to improve readability were made as appropriate.

More women participated in an interview than men. Over half of participants were aged between 45 and 79 (56 per cent). The majority of participants (85 per cent) identified as White. Just less than half of participants (44 per cent) had a disability or long-term health condition. Around one third (37 per cent) had caring responsibilities. Three quarters of participants (78 per cent) lived in an urban area. Among Experience Panels interview participants, the most

common benefit experience was of Disability Living Allowance (71 per cent). Among Client Panels interview participants, the most common benefit experience was of Best Start Grant / Foods (60 per cent). Further information and demographic information about interview participants can be found at Annex B.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on fieldwork and findings

Interviews with participants were held over the phone or online using the WebEx video call tool.

Research took place between January and April 2021. The profile of the pandemic and the associated restrictions on day-to-day life changed during this time. The list below outlines some of the key events which took place during the research period:

- **January 2021:** All of mainland Scotland was in level four lockdown. The vaccination programme began.
- **February 2021:** Towards the end of the month, the Scottish Government announced plans for the re-opening of schools and easing of certain restrictions in March and April.
- **March 2021:** On 17 March, the Scottish Government reported that 44 per cent of the adult population had received a first dose of the vaccine.² During March, various rules were relaxed such as: care home visiting resumed, schools returned and small groups could meet outdoors.
- **April 2021:** The "stay at home" order was lifted. Further rules were relaxed including the re-opening of: hairdressers, garden centres, and homeware stores.

² Scottish Government, 'Vaccination programme reaches two million people', 17 March 2021: <https://www.gov.scot/news/vaccination-programme-reaches-two-million-people/>

The research took place during this period of change and responses were likely shaped by the evolving nature of the pandemic. It is especially important to consider this in relation to the findings about future preferences. Attitudes and preferences may change as the pandemic continues to develop.

Charting preferences over time

To investigate preferred ways to get in touch over time, respondents were asked questions about before, during and after the pandemic. Survey respondents were asked to think about a time before the pandemic for example, December 2019. In this report, these responses are referred to as 'before the pandemic'.

For this research, 'during the pandemic' was considered to be the period starting from 1 March 2020. Respondents were asked about their experiences since this date. They were also asked to think about getting in touch with Social Security Scotland in 'the next two weeks'. Together, these responses are referred to as 'during the pandemic'.

Lastly, respondents were asked to think about making contact with Social Security Scotland 'once the pandemic was no longer a serious risk to public health'. Respondents could interpret for themselves when this might be and what restrictions on everyday life, if any, might look like. In this report, these responses are referred to as 'after the pandemic'.

Contacting Social Security Scotland during the pandemic

Survey respondents were asked if they had been in touch with Social Security Scotland during the pandemic (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Have you had an interaction with Social Security Scotland since the 1st of March 2020? (n=483)

	%
No	47.4
Yes	42.7
I'm not sure	9.9
Total	100

Around 40 per cent of respondents reported having contact with Social Security Scotland during the pandemic. Some respondents may have reported contact with DWP when answering this question. No checks were made to confirm if respondents had made contact with Social Security Scotland during the period.

Respondents who had an interaction were asked if it had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2.2). This could have been either positively or negatively.

Table 2.2: Did the COVID-19 pandemic impact your interaction with Social Security Scotland? (n=205)

	%
No impact	58.5
Yes, it had a minor impact	17.1
Yes, it had a big impact	16.6
I'm not sure	7.8
Total	100

Over half (59 per cent) said there had been no effect. Around one third said the pandemic had affected their interaction. An equal number (17 per cent) described this as a minor or big impact. There were no big differences between those who said the pandemic had affected their interaction based on demographic characteristics.

Comments on this revealed some confusion about contact with DWP and Social Security Scotland. This feedback has been omitted from analysis. Some respondents who specifically mentioned Social Security Scotland left positive feedback about their interactions during the pandemic. Feedback praised staff attitudes, the options for getting in touch and the overall time taken to apply and receive a decision.

“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)

“The person I spoke to about Funeral Support Payment appeared patient, kind and understanding.” (survey respondent)

“For setting up a Young Carer Grant for my daughter online...that was during the pandemic. The initial contact done instantly, the letter was out maybe a couple of days later and then the actual end result was I think was maybe within a week or week and a half, that’s an excellent turnaround.” (interview participant)

Some participants said it was normal for them to have infrequent contact with Social Security Scotland. They said communication had continued as expected during the pandemic. One participant noted that she had waited longer than usual to hear back after making an application.

“Not a lot has changed for me since the pandemic, I’ve still had my letters confirming the Carer’s Allowance Supplement I got in December and again in the previous June...I still had my letters for that. I applied for the Pregnancy and Baby payment I did that online...I had the letter through the door to confirm that was going to be paid and the same for Best Start Foods...I haven’t had issues applying or getting feedback. It’s been a bit longer, like pre-pandemic you heard quite quickly I felt, you had a letter quite promptly...it has been a bit longer which to be fair considering the circumstances we’re under, certainly doesn’t bother me.” (interview participant)

Experiences of contact during the pandemic

Survey respondents who said they had contact with Social Security Scotland were asked to reflect on their experience. Table 2.3 shows that the majority (83 per cent) said they were happy with their interaction.

Table 2.3: Was there anything you were unhappy with about this interaction? (n=206)

	%
No	82.5
Yes	17.5
Total	100

Around one fifth (18 percent) said there was something they were unhappy about. There were no substantial differences between those who reported being unhappy based on demographic characteristics.

Respondents who said they were unhappy were asked if they considered making a complaint (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4: Did you consider making a complaint? (n=35)

	%
No	54.3
Yes, but I did not make a complaint	34.3
Yes, I did make a complaint	11.4
Total	100

A little less than half (46 per cent) of respondents who said they were unhappy following their interaction considered making a complaint.

Respondents who considered but did not make a complaint were asked why they did not pursue this. All except one of these respondents were Experience Panel members who may have had a range of organisations in mind. Based on previous experience with other organisations, some said they felt it was not worth their while to make a complaint. These respondents felt action wouldn't be taken to address the issue. Some respondents felt this was made more likely given the effects of the pandemic and the pressures on public services.

“They don't get addressed in normal circumstances so had no chance of being addressed in current times.” (survey respondent)

“People too busy with what is going on with COVID-19.” (survey respondent)

Three interview participants discussed being unhappy with an aspect of their interaction. One participant who made a complaint said the pandemic made the process of talking to staff on the phone more difficult. The participant said repeated calls were needed to resolve the issue and thought this was because staff were working from home. This participant also said they had struggled to find information or get help with the process.

“My daughter was meant to get paid the Carer’s Allowance Supplement but because they put large print it has an English address on it and it was ten phone calls to Social Security Scotland to get it sorted. Each department didn’t know about it but rather than transferring you, you’d have to hang up and re-try again so it was a bit of a nightmare.

It would have helped for both UK [Department of Work and Pensions] and Social Security Scotland to have a link so that I didn’t have to make ten phone calls. Because they were working from home, then you’d have to phone back to get the answer to that, it was horrendous.

It was a software issue that if you’re partially sighted it doesn’t pick up your Scottish address it picks up the English large print address, so [my daughter] wasn’t getting the money she was entitled to. Eventually one person sorted it and she got it back dated for a year and a half.” (interview participant with experience of Carer’s Allowance Supplement)

Another interview participant said they had been unsure about the amount they had received following an application for Funeral Support Payment. At the time, they said they felt relieved when the payment arrived. Given their personal circumstances, the participant said they didn’t make a complaint but may have pursued this if the timing had been different.

“I calculated the Funeral Support Payment I received, and I should have got more help. I wasn’t angry but relieved when I got the help.” (interview participant with experience of Funeral Support Payment)

One interview participant said they had experienced delays in receiving information about Young Carer Grant. The participant explained that this had

been frustrating but was unsure about how to raise the problem with 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)

Improving interactions during the pandemic

Survey respondents were asked what Social Security Scotland could do to improve interactions with them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where it was clear that feedback referred to contact with DWP, this was removed from the analysis.

A number of respondents said there were no other measures Social Security Scotland could implement during the pandemic. There was a recognition that the pandemic had given rise to unprecedented challenges. Some respondents felt that the agency had done its best to adapt.

“I think they were helpful considering what was unfolding to each and every one of us.” (survey respondent with experience of Carer’s Allowance Supplement and Funeral Support Payment)

Other survey respondents thought improvements could be made by offering a wider range of online communication methods. These comments included calls for email, online chat and video call options.

“I find it really difficult to write with a pen, but can manage a keyboard. I got a little bit of internet connection but did not have access to a printer, so being able to write to them online might have helped.” (survey respondent)

Submitting evidence about a benefit claim

It is sometimes necessary to send supporting documents when making an application or reporting a change in circumstances. Respondents and participants who had contact with Social Security Scotland during the pandemic were asked if they had submitted evidence during this period.

Submitting evidence to Social Security Scotland during the pandemic

Table 3.1 shows the proportion of survey respondents who sent evidence to Social Security Scotland during the pandemic (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Did you need to submit evidence to Social Security Scotland? (n=203)

	%
No	68.5
Yes	28.1
I'm not sure	3.4
Total	100.0

Just less than a third (28 per cent) said they had submitted evidence during the pandemic. These respondents also indicated if they experienced any difficulty (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Experience of submitting evidence (n=57)

	%
I had no trouble with the process	73.7
I had difficulty with the process	26.3
Total	100

Most (74 per cent) respondents said they had no trouble with the process for submitting evidence. Just over a quarter (26 per cent) said they experienced some difficulty.

There were some differences between respondents who experienced difficulty based on demographic characteristics and geographic location. Proportionally, more women and more respondents with a long-term health condition or disability reported difficulty. Respondents living in rural areas were also more likely to say they had difficulty than respondents living in urban areas. The small number of total respondents for this question means it is important to take care when comparing differences between groups.

Paper and online evidence

Survey respondents and interview participants gave feedback about their experience of submitting evidence when making a claim for benefits. Some answers referred to experiences with DWP. All comments were included in the analysis.

The main theme among comments was a comparison between sending documents via post and uploading evidence online.

Difficulties with paper evidence

Survey respondents and interview participants said that sending paper evidence can be problematic. Some feedback said problems in acquiring and sending paper evidence were made more difficult during the pandemic. Clients without access to a printer or scanner at home said they faced difficulties making a photocopy. Respondents also noted delays and

problems with mail. Participants noted that the ability to upload evidence online was a helpful solution to many of these barriers.

“First document lost then wouldn’t stamp my original as couldn’t touch it because of COVID-19.” (survey respondent with experience of Disability Living Allowance³)

“I don’t have access to a photocopier and could not copy the necessary evidence to send by post. However, I submitted a query online and received a very helpful response which included instructions on how to upload electronic copies of the documents.” (survey respondent with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods)

One interview participant with experience of Young Carer Grant experienced significant difficulty submitting paper evidence to Social Security Scotland. Without access to the internet, the participant described the expense of buying a printer and the time taken for it to be delivered during the pandemic. The participant reported feeling anxious as a result of this experience.

“It cost money. For a like a printer and stuff to send stuff away to send your application...it made me anxious because it took too much time and money.” (interview participant with experience of Young Carer Grant)

Uploading evidence online

Many said uploading evidence online was quicker and more convenient than providing paper evidence. In April 2020, Social Security Scotland introduced a portal to allow clients to upload evidence via the mygov.scot website.

Interview participants who had submitted evidence to Social Security Scotland via the portal said the upload process was straightforward. One noted that the service should continue beyond the pandemic. One survey respondent with limited access to the internet said that upload had taken a

³ Disability Living Allowance is delivered by the DWP.

long time. Another participant also noted that digital upload can be difficult without access to a printer or scanner at home.

“[Evidence upload was] straightforward, went onto web page and followed steps to upload photo of evidence and what it was for and then upload...all straightforward, no problems along the way.” (interview participant)

“[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)

“Very slow internet resulted in many attempts to get details uploaded. Also limited data size needed 6 bits, only allowed 5. Took forever.” (survey respondent with limited access to the internet)

Interview participants said guidance and support could be helpful when uploading evidence online.

“Yeah, a how-to video is the best way forward. As long as the instructions are precise and clear. You push this button and this would happen. Just push the button that’s what it does and that’s what you see.” (interview participant)

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









Both survey respondents and interview participants were asked how they preferred to get in touch and why, and if this changed for different purposes. All were also asked if their preferences would be different during or after the pandemic. This chapter provides an overview of responses from survey respondents.

Most respondents said they preferred a mix of communication methods for getting in touch for different reasons. Only a small number said they would use the same method to get in touch regardless of the purpose. There was little change in preferences before, during and after the pandemic.

Getting in touch for different reasons

Table 4 shows the preferred method for getting in touch for six different purposes. The table also shows the proportion of respondents choosing that method before, during and after the pandemic. Figures for all methods for each purpose can be found in Tables C1 to C6 in Annex C.

Table 4: Preferred ways to get in touch for six purposes before, during and after the pandemic (n=approx. 484)

Reason for getting in touch	Most preferred method	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	After the pandemic
Advice and general information	 Telephone	50%	47%	45%
Applying for a benefit	 Online form	44%	49%	47%
Monitoring the progress of your application	 Telephone	51%	47%	46%
Challenge a decision	 Paper form/post	48%	47%	47%
An urgent situation relating to your application	 Telephone	69%	65%	63%
Advising a change in circumstances	 Telephone 39%		 Online form 38%	 Online form 37%

Telephone came in first place for three out of the six purposes: for advice and general information; monitoring the progress of an application; and for urgent situations. For these purposes, telephone remained the most preferred method before, during and after the pandemic. There was only a small decline after the pandemic compared to before.

Around half of respondents said their preferred way to make an application was an online form. This remained the case before, during and after the pandemic.

Respondents could choose between three methods to challenge a decision made about an application: paper form, telephone and in person. Before, during and after the pandemic, around half said they would do this via a paper form.

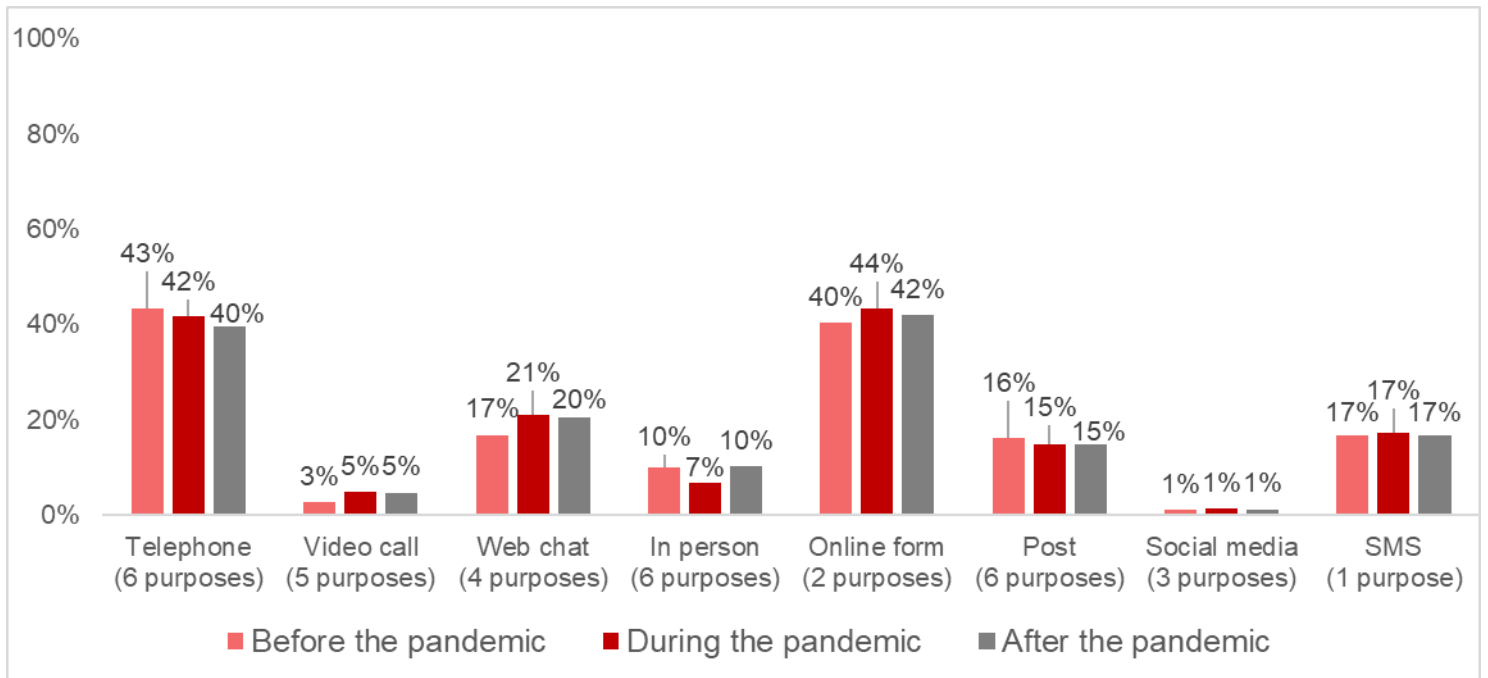
Advising a change in circumstances was the only purpose for which the preferred method changed during and after the pandemic. Before the pandemic, just more than a third (39 per cent) of respondents said telephone was their preferred way to do this. During and after the pandemic, online form narrowly overtook telephone with around a third preferring this.

Methods of communication

Respondents were able to choose between options which were relevant to each purpose for getting in touch. This means not all methods were available to choose for each purpose. Figure 4 shows survey respondents' preferred communication methods before, during and after the pandemic.⁴

⁴ Across the three sets of questions, a small number of respondents did not give a preferred method for each of the six purposes. This means that the total number of respondents isn't exactly consistent for each purpose.

Figure 4: Survey respondents' preferred communication methods before, during and after the pandemic. Total choices for each method across available purposes. (n= approx. 484)



Respondents could chose telephone, in person and post (paper forms or letters) for all of the purposes. Around 40 per cent of respondents said telephone was their preferred choice before, during and after the pandemic. Around one in ten (10 per cent) of respondents said meeting in person would be their preferred across all purposes. Preference for post across all the purposes remained roughly the same before, during and after the pandemic at around 15 per cent of respondents.

Around 40 per cent of respondents chose online form for making an application and advising a change in circumstances. The proportion of respondents choosing web chat increased during and after the pandemic to around a fifth (20 per cent). Respondents could select text messages (SMS) for updates about the progress of an application. Less than a quarter (17 per cent) said this would be their preferred method before, during and after the pandemic.

Video call was included as an option for all purposes except to challenge a decision. 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.

Attitudes about different methods for getting in touch

This chapter is split into six sections, one for each communication method as follows: telephone, post, web chat, text messages, online forms, and social media. Separate chapters cover feedback about video calls and in-person interactions.

Telephone

Survey respondents were able to choose telephone as their preferred way to get in touch for six different reasons. As shown in the previous chapter, across all purposes around 40 per cent of respondents said they preferred phone calls. Table 5.1 shows the proportion of respondents choosing telephone for each purpose before, during and after the pandemic.

Table 5.1: Survey respondents who said telephone was their preferred way to get in touch with Social Security Scotland (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	50.2	47.4	44.5
Applying for a benefit	16.6	17.9	15.4
Asking about the progress of your application	50.5	46.8	45.8
To challenge a decision	34.5	39.0	34.6
An urgent situation relating to your claim	69.3	64.8	62.7
Advising a change in circumstances	39.0	35.7	34.9

Telephone was the preferred method for getting in touch for three purposes: advice and general information; progress updates; and urgent situations. This was true before, during and after the pandemic. Before the pandemic, telephone was the most preferred way to advise Social Security Scotland of a change in circumstances. These figures are highlighted in bold.

Views about phone calls

During the pandemic, some respondents said that their preferences had changed to include more phone calls due to limitations on meeting in person.

“I would want to reduce my risk of contracting COVID-19 so therefore I would hope to do everything by telephone. I don’t like online forms as they can be complicated and you don’t have anybody to ask for help while filling them in.” (survey respondent)

“Previously [to challenge a decision] I would have preferred a face to face conversation but now this is not possible I would prefer a phone call or video chat.” (survey respondent)

Some feedback said that phone calls gave callers the chance to fully explain their circumstances and ensure important details weren't missed. A couple of comments noted that phone calls were a good way to feel a reassuring sense of human contact.

“By phone I don't have to arrange to get somewhere but I can still speak to a real person in real time and be able to explain and put my points across.” (survey respondent)

“When I have to phone, could you keep the recorded messages to a minimum? No-one likes machines and would prefer a person.” (survey respondent)

“I like to speak to a person.” (interview participant)

Some interview participants said they preferred the telephone as it meant they could get quick answers. Participants who preferred other methods also said they would phone Social Security Scotland if they needed a quick response. Respondents also said that telephone was preferred for initial contact.

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

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

“Would phone first of all. Even if I had to leave a message, I feel I have a good phone manner and know how to do that.” (interview participant)

Other participants said that they had experienced long wait times when calling organisations during the pandemic. Participants said waiting in long queues was frustrating. Some said they understood that staff working from home during the pandemic may have affected wait times. Some said they would now consider alternative ways of getting in touch because of this.

“I have changed some methods [during the pandemic] from telephone as it takes far too long and stresses me.” (survey respondent)

“It’s definitely changed [during the pandemic] ...I know that people are not working in the office, people are working from home so you are put into a big queue and you either have to hang on for hours or you just don’t get to talk to any of them. It has made a huge difference.” (interview participant)

“As telephone calls are difficult due to lines being extra busy, trying to talk to someone would be frustrating so web chat/online forms are much quicker and more suitable. I would be quite happy to continue to use these forms of communication in the future so keeping telephone lines free for urgent matters.” (survey respondent)

Post

Survey respondents were able to choose post or paper form as their preferred way to get in touch for six different reasons. As shown in the previous chapter, across all purposes around 15 per cent of respondents said they preferred post. Table 5.2 shows the proportion of respondents choosing post for each purpose before, during and after the pandemic.

Table 5.2: Survey respondents who said post was their preferred way to get in touch with Social Security Scotland (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	9.8	8.4	7.9
Applying for a benefit	23.1	19.5	20.4
Asking about the progress of your application	5.9	3.8	4.8
To challenge a decision	47.9	47.3	47.0
An urgent situation relating to your claim	1.5	1.3	1.3
Advising a change in circumstances	9.7	9.5	8.8

Survey respondents said post was their preferred way to challenge a decision about a benefit. Around half chose post for this purpose before, during and after the pandemic. These figures are highlighted in bold.

Around a fifth (20 per cent) of respondents said post was their preferred way to make an application before, during and after the pandemic. This was the second most popular option behind online form. Post was not a popular option for advice and general information, progress updates or advising a change in circumstances. With social media, post was the least popular option for urgent situations.

Views about using post

During the pandemic, some comments said that delays in Royal Mail's service had caused difficulties with communication via post. Some respondents noted this in reference to submitting evidence, as noted in a previous chapter. Some respondents said that their previous preference for post had shifted due to these difficulties. One interview participant said that they took hygiene precautions with post during the pandemic. The participant said he sanitised post before opening it and washed his hands afterwards.

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

“[Letters] took quite a while to arrive, especially at Christmas with Royal Mail being badly impacted. I understand why Social Security Scotland is sending letters but sometimes emails that are quite instant would sometimes be better for less confidential stuff.

Letters sometimes arrive one, two, three weeks late. There was an instance where I got a payment. So I saw a payment in my bank on a Monday and I got a letter about the payment the following Wednesday.” (interview participant)

Some participants said they liked letters because they could refer to the information at their convenience. Another benefit of communication via post was that created a record of all information sent and received. Some said it was easier to explain personal circumstances in detail, or include supplementary documents, on paper forms or via letter.

“I prefer to challenge decisions by paper as that allows me to review what I’m trying to put over and I have a record of it for the future, but in all other instances I’d be happy to video call and communicate that way.” (survey respondent)

“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)

One interview participant said that post was the best way for information coming from Social Security Scotland. For information going the other way, from the client to the agency, the participant said she preferred phone calls. One respondent said that Social Security Scotland should consider the environmental impact of sending letters.

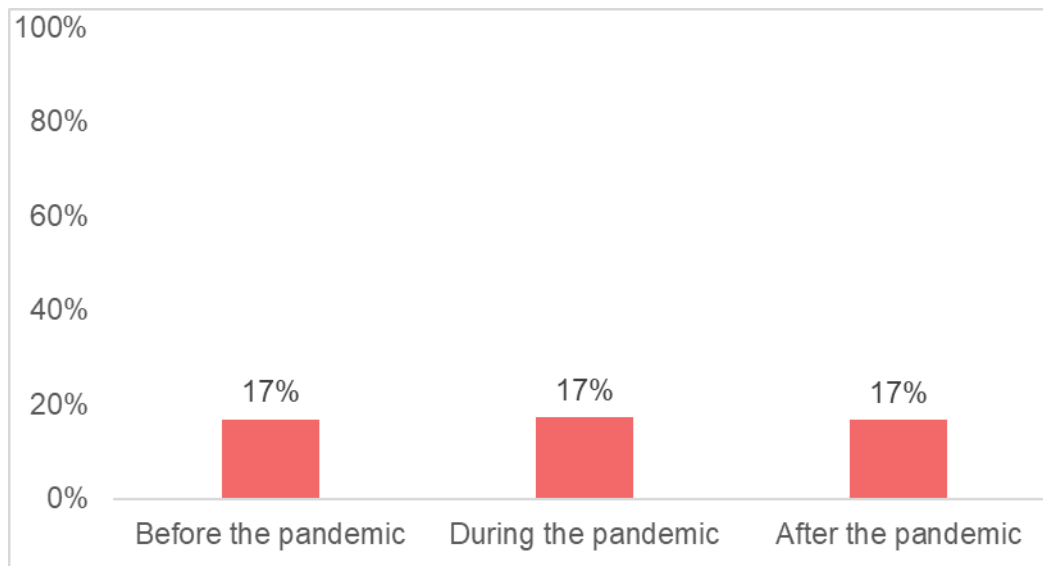
“If communication coming from Social Security Scotland then a letter is probably the best way to do this, but if communication is coming from me the phone is preferred.” (survey respondent)

“Receiving letters is alright, in terms of physical verification, but seems a bit environmentally wasteful.” (survey respondent)

Text messages (SMS)

Figure 5 shows that around 17 per cent of survey respondents said they would use text messages to check on the progress of an application. Text messages were the second most preferred method for this purpose, behind telephone. This was true for before, during and after the pandemic.

Figure 5: Survey respondents who prefer text messages for progress updates from Social Security Scotland (n=approx. 484)



Views about text messages

Only a couple of participants mentioned experience of receiving text messages from Social Security Scotland. One survey respondent mentioned receiving duplicate text messages each time she was contacted this way. One interview participant said that they had received text messages from Social Security Scotland late at night. The participant had experience of Best Start Grant/Foods and said the timing of the text messages had made her feel “uncomfortable”.

“Better text communication – but not in a bad way – I get two texts off you every time you send a message!!” (survey respondent with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods)

A couple of participants said that they had received more information via text message during the pandemic. One interview participant with experience of receiving text messages from DWP said this was a helpful way to receive

updates about her application. Other respondents said that they checked text messages regularly and agreed they were a good way to get reminders.

“Now, I receive more texts, I receive more information by texts; that didn’t happen before.” (interview participant)

“So it was like they [text messages] would tell me what stage they were at. So that took less pressure off me having to chase people up to say ‘look, where’s my application, what stage is it at’.” (interview participant)

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

One interview participant said text messages were an important option for her as she is unable to access the internet at home. Other feedback mentioned that it was important to note that not everyone has a smartphone with internet access. For these people, text messages with links to webpages were not a suitable way to send information. One interview participant discussed this in relation to text messages received from DWP which prompted him to go online. The participant described feeling uneasy about these as he is unable to access the internet at home. On these occasions, he makes phone calls to follow up and set his mind at ease.

“I am actually not online. I don’t have any access to internet at all. That’s why I have a lot of communication through texts. I don’t have access to a smartphone.” (interview participant)

“I don’t have any broadband – I got to the library if I’m stuck. I was concerned, what happens if I don’t respond to that message, because I don’t have a computer, broadband, the library is shut...” (interview participant)

Two interview participants said they felt wary of text messages for security reasons. These participants said they had heard a lot about scams via text

message. For this reason, these participants said would feel more comfortable talking to Social Security Scotland in another way.

“At the moment there are so many scams that you know if you get a text message saying that my national insurance number is going to be used by somebody and they are going to cut me off, stupid stuff like that and I am thinking for somebody older who can’t understand, it’s a shame, they get sucked in to these things. 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

Online form was an available choice for two of the six purposes: making an application and advising a change in circumstances. As shown in the previous chapter, across these two purposes around 40 per cent of respondents said they preferred online forms. Table 5.3 shows the proportion of respondents choosing online form for each of these purposes before, during and after the pandemic.

Table 5.3: Survey respondents who said online form was their preferred way to submit an application or advise a change in circumstances (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Applying for a benefit	43.8%	49.4%	47.1%
Advising a change in circumstances	37.1%	37.6%	36.8%

Online form was the most preferred way to apply for a benefit. Around half of respondents chose this method before, during and after the pandemic. Just over a third of respondents favoured an online form for advising a change in

circumstances. During and after the pandemic, online form overtook the telephone as the most preferred option for this purpose. These figures are highlighted in bold in Table 5.3.

One interview participant said that online forms were quicker to complete and more accessible than paper forms. One survey respondent said that an online form should be available to allow clients to challenge a decision.

“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)

“I think organisations have become more competent in using online systems. I’d be happy to appeal against a decision by completing an online form but this option was not available [in the survey].” (survey respondent)

Other suggestions for online communication

Several survey respondents and interview participants said that Social Security Scotland should offer the option of getting in touch via email.

“There should be a communication system such as email to keep informed about any changes and help.” (survey respondent)

“The early questions [in the survey] gave options for my preferred communication method with Social Security Scotland that included SMS and live web chat, but not email. So I was forced to opt for post or telephone communication when I would probably have preferred email. I find both SMS and web chat to be limited compared to email.” (survey respondent)

“I would look at the website first. If I couldn’t find what I wanted I would send an email. I would find an email address and email my query.” (interview participant)

Participants said email was a good way to keep a record of what had been discussed. Participants said this made them feel reassured that they wouldn't miss important information. This was compared to the sometimes stressful experience of trying to remember what was said during a phone call. This could also be helpful for clients with memory problems.

"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)

Some participants said email would give them the opportunity to fully explain their personal circumstances or questions. Some said email allowed them to take their time whereas methods like web chat or phone calls could leave them feeling rushed.

"I haven't checked any of the choices to three of the [survey] sections because my preferred method of contact would be by email [option not included]. This was the same pre-COVID-19 issues too. I prefer email even to an online web chat as it is more flexible and allows me to digest any information properly and respond in my own time." (survey respondent)

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

"Creating an app would make it easier to communicate and make applications." (survey respondent)

"There should be an online platform to monitor the progress of an application." (survey respondent)

Web chat

Survey respondents could select web chat for four purposes: getting advice and information, progress updates, urgent situations and advising a change in circumstances. As shown in the previous chapter, across these purposes around 20 per cent of respondents chose web chat. Table 5.4 shows the proportion of respondents choosing online form for each of these purposes before, during and after the pandemic.

Table 5.4: Survey respondents who said web chat was their preferred way to get in touch with Social Security Scotland (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	24.7	29.9	29.0
Asking about the progress of your application	19.2	24.1	23.2
An urgent situation relating to your claim	16.1	20.5	19.4
Advising a change in circumstances	7.6	10.4	10.3

Advice and general information was the most popular purpose for using web chat. The proportion of survey respondents choosing this method for this purpose increased during the pandemic from 25 to 30 per cent.

Although web chat was not the most preferred method for any of the purposes, it was the second most popular choice for getting advice and information, progress updates, and getting in touch in urgent situations.

Attitudes about web chat

In response to the pandemic, Social Security Scotland introduced a web chat service in May 2020. Clients can use this for general enquiries and to ask for progress updates on their application.

One interview participant had used the Social Security Scotland web chat service to check on the progress of their application. The participant found the service helpful and convenient and was pleased with the quick response. A survey participant who had used the service said they hoped it would remain an option after the pandemic.

“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)

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

Other interview participants discussed the benefits of web chat as a way to engage with other organisations. Participants said web chat was a good way to get quick answers and to avoid waiting times on the phone. A couple of participants also said that web chat was useful when information was hard to find online or not detailed enough.

“It’s [web chat] pretty instant – don’t have to listen to annoying music.” (interview participant)

“Basic information is easy, but once you start getting into it online, it’s difficult to get all the information. But if there was a backup, like a web chat I’ve used before it was a fantastic. That would be good for asking questions.” (interview participant)

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

also said web chat was a good option as long as it was possible to resolve issues without being re-directed to other channels.

“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)

“Online web chats give you more time to think and it appears to be a faster and more responsive service. This would only work if the adviser could see your records and provide answers on the basis of the information in the records.” (survey respondent)

“More online ‘chat’ enquiries, with most organisations, though this can be pretty frustrating, particularly if you are required to get in touch with an organisation several times to progress or resolve an issue, as you rarely get to ‘speak’ to the same individual twice. So repeating the history of the same issue over and over to different faceless people makes you feel unimportant/worthless somehow, particularly if nothing seems to get resolved.” (interview participant)

A couple of interview participants said they preferred not to use web chat. One participant said web chat could lack the human touch and provide only limited information. Another participant said health conditions could make extended periods of typing difficult.

“The video call in that instance [contacting Social Security Scotland] would be better, with open web chat I feel I'm talking to robot. If I had chance to talk to a person I'd prefer that.” (interview participant)

“Sometimes it's a pain in the bum trying to type sometimes especially when I am really sore because I have to try to lean over.” (interview participant)

Social media

Social media was included as an option for three purposes: advice and information, progress updates and urgent situations. Only around 1 per cent

of survey respondents said social media was their preferred way to get in touch. This stayed the same before, during and after the pandemic.

One interview participant said that social media was a good way to find out information from the Scottish Government. Another interview participant said Facebook or Instagram would be a helpful way for Social Security Scotland to provide information.

“The amount of information that is now going onto social media [is good]. Like things are being put up on ScotGov twitter, [it’s] good way to get into my demographic – a good way to deliver information.” (interview participant with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods)

“If Social Security Scotland had specific Facebook or Instagram groups, they can share their achievement 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)

Changes in communication preferences during and after the pandemic

The majority of survey respondents said their preferences would stay the same during and after the pandemic. Similarly, some interview participants said that their preferences had not been affected by the pandemic and were likely to remain unchanged. Some said this was because they were used to using online communication before the pandemic and this had continued throughout. Some respondents said that they had infrequent contact with Social Security Scotland so their preferences were unchanged during the pandemic.

“I used internet a lot before the pandemic, so for me it’s the same.” (interview participant)

“I don’t contact Social Security Scotland much, about once per year, so not felt impact.” (interview participant with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods)

“Communication with Social Security [Scotland] hasn’t really changed, even before the pandemic it was always through letters and is still through letters. Like notifications when the payment is coming in, it’s always through the post so that hasn’t changed.” (interview participant with experience of Carer’s Allowance Supplement)

This remainder of this chapter looks at the preferences of survey respondents who indicated a change during or after the pandemic.

Changes during the pandemic

Table 6.1 shows that around a quarter (23 per cent) of respondents said that their preferred way to get in touch would be different if they had to contact Social Security Scotland during the pandemic.

Table 6.1: If you had to contact Social Security Scotland in the next two weeks, do you think your preferences would be different to before the pandemic? (n=480)⁵

	%
No	64.6
Yes	22.9
I’m not sure	12.5
Total	100

⁵ A small number of respondents who said their preferences would change made no modifications to their preferred methods for any of the purposes. For analysis purposes, these responses were re-labelled as having said ‘no’ to this question.

There were some differences between respondents who said their preferences would change based on demographic characteristics. Results for different groups can be found in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Different preferences during the pandemic – demographic characteristics

	Proportion saying their preferences would be different during the pandemic (%)
Age	
25-44 (n=85)	11.8
45-59 (n=185)	20.0
60-79 (n=119)	34.5
Disability status	
Long-term health condition or disability (n=318)	24.8
No Long-term health condition or disability (n=88)	10.2

Older respondents were more likely to say they would change their preferences during the pandemic. Over a third (35 per cent) of respondents aged between 60 and 79 said their preferences would be different. This is compared to only 12 per cent of respondents aged between 25 and 44.

A quarter (25 per cent) of respondents with a long-term health condition or disability said their preferences would be different during the pandemic. Only 10 per cent of respondents who don't have a health condition or disability said their preferences would change.

Respondents who completed the survey in January were more likely to say their preferences would change during the pandemic. In keeping with the overall result for the question, around a quarter (25 per cent) of respondents

who completed the survey in January said their preferences would change. Among those who completed the survey at the end of February or in March, only between 4 per cent and 18 per cent indicated a change. The shifting nature of the pandemic, roll out of the vaccination programme and timetable for easing restrictions may have affected how respondents thought about their preferences. Experience Panels respondents completed the survey earlier in the research period compared to Client Panels respondents. Differences in the make-up of the two groups, such as benefit experience, may also have contributed to this difference.

Changes after the pandemic

Compared to before the pandemic, a fifth of respondents (20 per cent) said their preferences would change once the pandemic was no longer a serious risk to public health (Table 6.3).

Table 6.3: Do you think your preferred ways of communicating with Social Security Scotland will be different after the pandemic, compared to in December 2019? (n=478)⁶

	%
No	66.9
Yes	19.5
I'm not sure	13.6
Total	100

⁶ A small number of respondents who said their preferences would change made no modifications to their preferred methods for any of the purposes. For analysis purposes, these responses were re-labelled as having said 'no' to this question.

There were some differences between respondents who said their preferences would change based on demographic characteristics. Results for different groups can be found in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4: Different preferences after the pandemic – demographic characteristics

	Proportion saying their preferences would be different during the pandemic (%)
Age	
25-44 (n=86)	14.0
45-59 (n=185)	16.2
60-79 (n=116)	25.0
Disability status	
Long-term health condition or disability (n=316)	19.6
No Long-term health condition or disability (n=88)	12.5

Older respondents were more likely to say their preferences would change after the pandemic. A quarter (25 per cent) of respondents aged between 60 and 79 indicated a change, compared to 14 per cent of respondents aged under 44. Participants with a long-term health condition or disability were more likely to say there would be a change in their preferences. A fifth (20 per cent) indicated a change compared to 13 per cent of respondents without a long-term health condition or disability.

Respondents who completed the survey earlier in the year were more likely to say their preferences would change after the pandemic. Around a quarter (25 per cent) of respondents who completed the survey in January said their preferences would change. Only 12 per cent of those who completed the survey in March indicated a change.

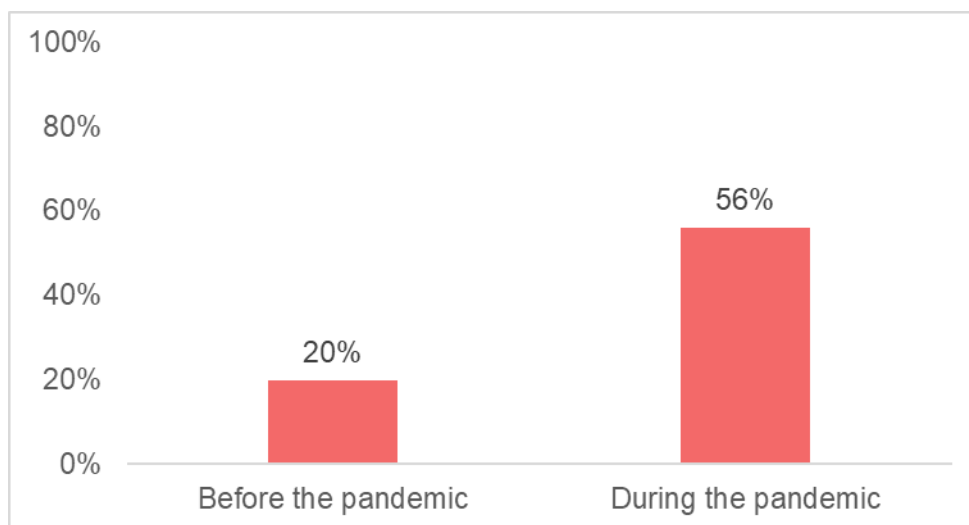
Increasing preferences for online communication

Those who indicated a change during or after the pandemic said they would prefer more online communication.

During the pandemic

Online methods of communication were available to choose for all purposes except challenging a decision. Among those who indicated a change during the pandemic, there was an increase in preferences for online forms, web chat, social media, and video call (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Preference for online methods among survey respondents whose preferences would be different during the pandemic (n=approx. 110)

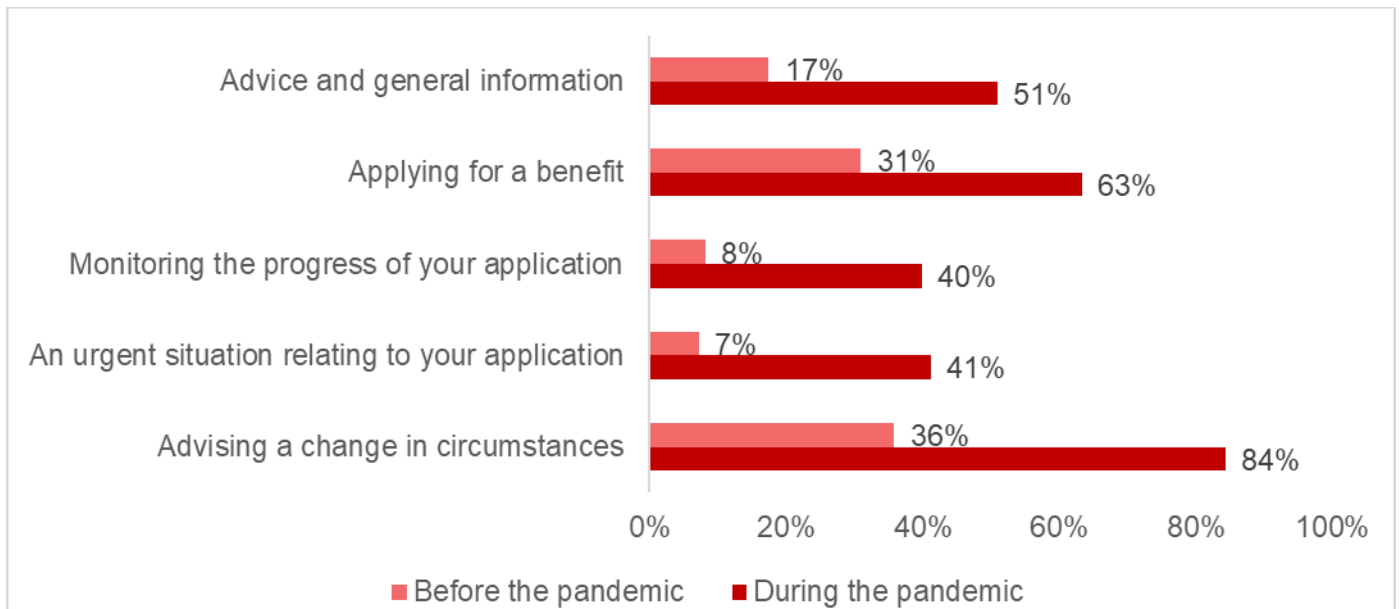


Over half (56 per cent) of choices by those who indicated a change during the pandemic were for online methods. This was up from 20 per cent before the pandemic.

Among respondents who indicated a change during the pandemic, preferences for online methods more than doubled for all relevant purposes.

Figure 6.2 shows the increase in preferences for online methods for each purpose.

Figure 6.2: Online methods chosen by respondents who said their preferences would be different during the pandemic (n=approx. 110)

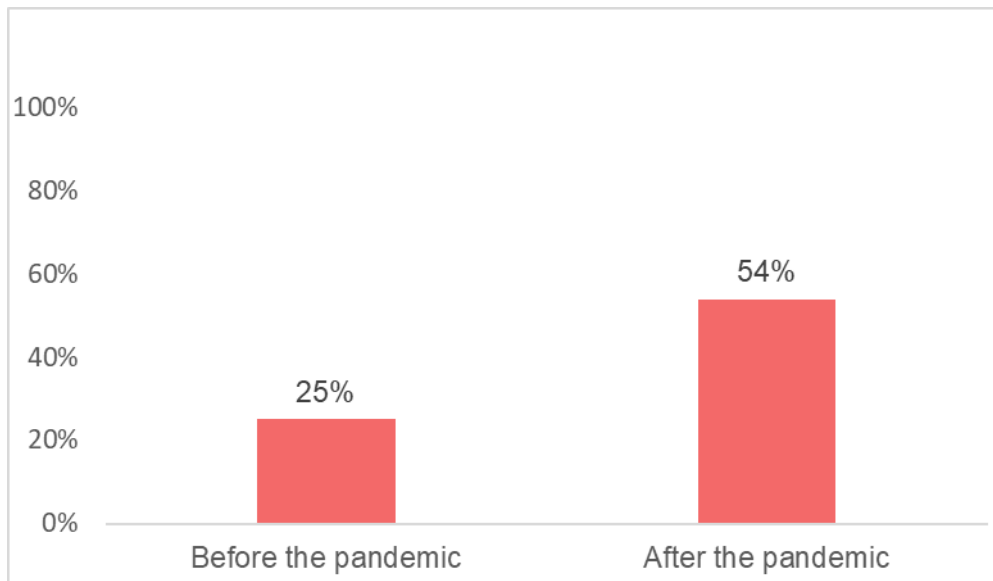


More than half of respondents who said their preferences would change during the pandemic now chose online methods for: advice and information (51 per cent); making an application (63 per cent); and advising a change in circumstances (84 per cent).

After the pandemic

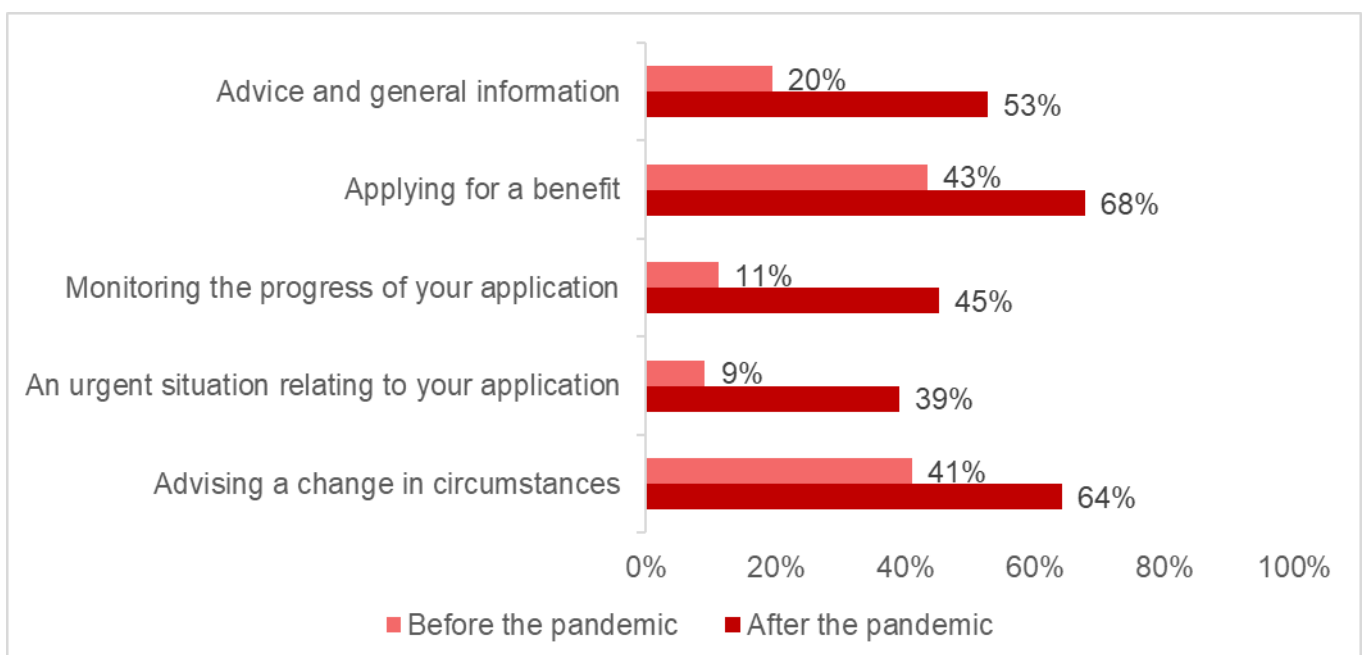
Those who indicated a change after the pandemic also chose more online methods (Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3: Preference for online methods among survey respondents whose preferences would be different after the pandemic (n=approx. 93)



Over half (54 per cent) of choices by those who indicated a change after the pandemic were for online methods. This was up from 25 per cent before the pandemic. Figure 6.4 shows the increase in online communication for different purposes.

Figure 6.4: Online methods chosen by respondents who said their preferences would be different after the pandemic (n=approx. 93)



There were large increases for all purposes. Over half of respondents who made a change now chose online methods for: advice and information (53 per cent); making an application (68 per cent); and advising a change in circumstances (64 per cent).

Some participants said they gained experience and confidence communicating online during the pandemic. Some said that many services had moved online due to restrictions which limited in-person interactions. Some participants said that they had been shielding at home due to health concerns. They said that online communication was a safe and convenient way to communicate while this was the case.

“I’ve been using online communication for a while but since the pandemic lots of things have moved to be online and it suits me so much better. I do everything from my phone which is like my mini computer.” (interview participant)

“A lot of it online chat or videos now rather than going to places. More on email, being emailed things and filling them in and sending them back.” (interview participant)

“I am shielding and would want to do most things digitally.” (survey respondent)

“More appointments with people are online. I live in north Scotland and this makes things much easier for me.” (survey respondent)

After the pandemic, some respondents said that they would be happy to continue communicating online. Some noted that their experience during the pandemic had increased their confidence. Others said that they had become used to communicating online.

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

“I think like many people I've become accustomed to the lack of personal contact, I can touch type and I'm tech savvy so online forms and web chats are fine for me.” (survey respondent)

Some said that the pandemic had shown how effective online communication could be. Comments said these advantages should not be forgotten after the pandemic. Some highlighted that video calls could replace in-person interactions or that online communication may become standard after the pandemic.

“Since the pandemic general working practices have had to adapt but in doing so they are now more user friendly for those of us with a disability. So should all options be available post pandemic. I see no reason to revert to telephone, face-to-face and postal services as the only way to do business of any kind.” (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. So even if and when we get to the end of this pandemic I think it will be a very different world as it is clear that people don't need to travel miles for a meeting.” (survey respondent)

“Methods of contact would revert to normal, or begin the new normal by using computerised methods of contact.” (survey respondent)

One interview participant said he was looking forward to communicating online again once his local library reopened. The participant said without internet access at home, he had switched from communicating online to using the phone during the pandemic. Once restrictions were eased to allow his local library to reopen, he planned to resume his online activities.

Some participants without online access at home said they would be unlikely to be part of the trend towards more online communication after the pandemic. These participants said that options for communication should continue to take into account that not everyone has access to the internet.

These participants said a change was unlikely, especially a permanent change to include more online communication.

“Online portals, video conferencing apps, they are fine for those who have access to the technology and can afford both the equipment and pay for a broadband connection as well. I, for example use a hot spot attached to my mobile, which was sufficient pre-pandemic, but struggles with the speed needed for video conferencing.

Many did not have access to these technologies in their homes, and publicly accessible computers (such as those in libraries) are either severely limited, or completely closed off all together.” (survey respondent)

“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)

“I think that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the digital divide, and that has to be addressed. Lots of people simply don't have internet access, or call credit to make telephone calls.” (survey respondent)

Others noted that they were less comfortable communicating online compared to other methods. Some respondents said this was because their disability, health condition or age could make online communication difficult.

“Having the availability of an in person customer-facing office is important. I have hearing and speech issues and talking face-to-face is easier, clearer and more accurate for both myself and the operator. Not everyone can freely access online or phone.” (survey respondent)

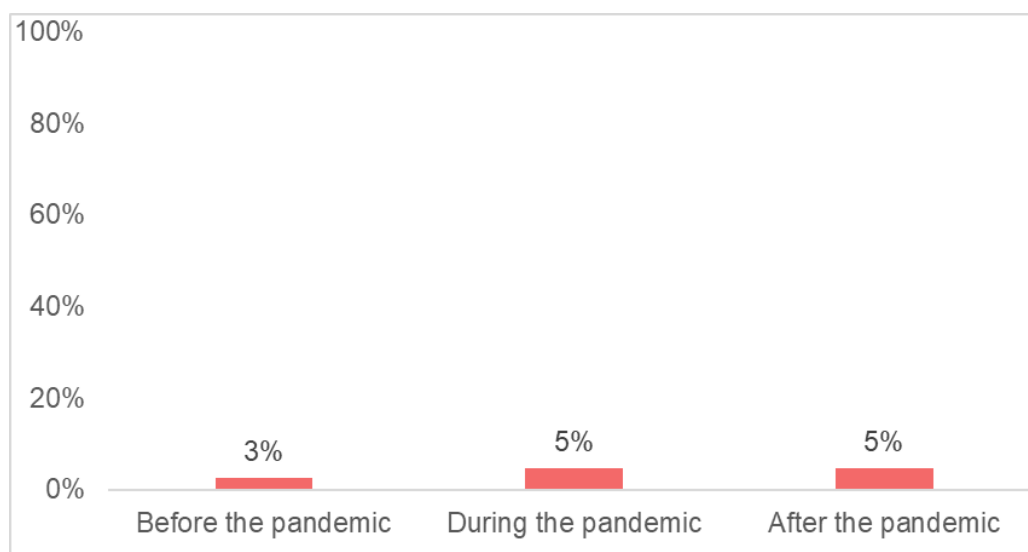
“Online communications are difficult and off putting for older people who are not familiar or comfortable with modern technology.” (survey respondent)

“You are not able to put your point over on a video stream as us older people are not used to working video link usually phone or letter.” (survey respondent)

Talking to Social Security Scotland via video call

The proportion of respondents choosing video call increased during and after the pandemic from three to five percent (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1: Preference for video call communication across five reasons for getting in touch with Social Security Scotland (n=approx. 484)



Proportionally, more respondents with experience of a disability benefit chose video call than those with experience of other benefits. This remained less than five per cent for any purpose.

When to use a video call

Table 7.1 shows the proportion of respondents choosing video call for each purpose before, during and after the pandemic.

Table 7.1: preference for video call before, during and after the pandemic (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	2.5	4.4	4.6
Applying for a benefit	2.9	4.8	4.4
Asking about the progress of your application	2.9	5.1	5.2
An urgent situation relating to your claim	3.2	6.6	5.7
Advising a change in circumstances	1.9	3.2	4.0

The proportion of survey respondents choosing video call during and after the pandemic was fairly consistent across the purposes. Compared to the other purposes, fewer respondents said they preferred video call for advising a change in circumstances. Video call was not the most preferred method for any purpose but was the third most popular option for advice and general information and an urgent situation.

Only 2 of the 65 Client Panel respondents said they would prefer video call for any of the reasons for getting in touch. Proportionally more Experience Panel members were interested in video call. 13 per cent of Experience Panel respondents chose this for at least one purpose. No respondent under the age of 25 or over 80 chose video call.

Participants had different ideas about what purposes were best suited to video call. One interview participant said they would like to use video calls for all interactions. There was a mix of opinions about using a video call for advice and general information. One interview participant said a video call would be a helpful to help understand online information before making an

application. Another participant said it was easier to get straightforward information over the phone.

“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)

“Yeah if I was looking for information probably not. If it was a back and forward type of thing, it might be better not just over phone call where you can’t see.” (interview participant)

“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....on the website, it’s written for everyone to read.” (interview participant)

Some participants who were in favour of video calls said they would only consider using this method if it was appropriate to the situation. One participant said she would have been unlikely to use video call when applying for Funeral Support Payment. The participant said she would’ve been concerned about appearing on screen while upset. Another participant said that they were unlikely to use a video call to challenge a decision. Again, this was to avoid getting upset in front of an adviser.

“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. Totally different hearing it but totally different seeing someone upset when you’re at the other side of the computer screen.” (interview participant with experience of Funeral Support Payment)

“I would prefer an email for the decision, if the decision was against me I wouldn’t want someone to see me in tears.” (interview participant)

Arranging a video call

Almost all interview participants said they would expect Social Security Scotland to arrange video calls in advance. Participants said they would want to receive an invite to a video call with a link to join the meeting. Participants mentioned a range of ways to receive this information including letters and via phone call. Some said they would prefer an invite via email as it is easy to click a link directly to the meeting. Some also said an email would allow them to directly add the appointment to their online calendar. One participant noted that text messages with reminders about the appointment can also be helpful.

“I prefer email personally...I can then automatically transfer it from the email to my diary and my diary will give me the options to put alarms on.” (interview participant)

“Email...looking at it from an older person’s point of view, they can see ‘oh that’s a link, I can click on that’...rather than a letter and trying to copy that into a browser.” (interview participant)

There were also a couple of suggestions about other ways video calls could be arranged. One interview participant suggested there could be a permanent video call link which clients could use at any time to connect with an adviser. One participant suggested a ‘drop-in’ video call service for specific benefits or at routine intervals across the year.

“If it was while applying, I would like a form online that can apply then if it’s a video link that would be initiated by Social Security Scotland. I’d also like a video link to a central area if I had a question. Say I was going to make a change, you could either have a form, put it through in a form then video link comes back or have like a call centre that I could call in on in a video.” (interview participant)

“You could potentially have a Zoom call for a particular grant where people could drop in and out, as they so wish. We’ve done a few at nursery where we’ve been able to drop in and out as we needed to which worked really well so I don’t know if that’s something Social Security Scotland would look at. Maybe every quarter or half a year, whatever, running like a workshop day.”
(interview participant)

As well as the time and date of the call, participants said it would be helpful if an invite to a video call included information about what would be discussed and how long the call might last. One participant said it could be helpful to include an indication of whether confidential information would be discussed. This would allow clients to choose an appropriate space at home to have the call. Other information mentioned by participants included a list of documents or information to prepare in advance and information on how to rearrange.

Participants also said instructions about how to join the call would be helpful as well as guidance on what to do if problems occurred. One participant said it could be helpful to know the gender of the adviser who will be on the call. One participant said the invite should ask if the adviser can use the client’s first name.

“What we’re going to talk about...anything I need specifically like ID.”
(interview participant)

“Rough length of time to be sitting there is a big one as a disabled person, I think. People can’t concentrate for long if it is a long call, need to do the toilet beforehand or make sure medication is beside them, a drink.” (interview participant)

“I would expect to see a link showing me exactly what to do as if I was a first-time user.” (interview participant)

Using cameras

Many said a key benefit was being able to see the person you're talking to. Participants felt a sense of human connection that could be missing in other forms of communication. Video calls allow both parties to see facial expressions and body language and hear inflections and subtleties in speech. As such, most participants said they would want cameras to be on during a video call with Social Security Scotland. Some participants said that this was the key feature of video calls and would expect to see the adviser they were talking to.

"You can see the reaction...they can see the reaction to [their] questions."
(interview participant)

"I love them. We dreamed of having phones that had video in them. We have them. Unfortunately it's not available to everyone but to me is a massive improvement on the communication that is possible. For example, I can't see if you are rolling your eyes, or if you're smiling. In a video call it's all there."
(interview participant)

"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)

A few participants said that not everyone might be comfortable using their camera. Reasons included anxiety around appearance, maintaining privacy at home and potential interruptions from other household members.

"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)

Video call platforms

People who took part in the research mentioned experience with a variety of different platforms: AttendAnywhere, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Signal, Skype, Teams, Vscene, WebEx, WhatsApp and Zoom. Survey respondents said which video call platform they preferred to use. (Table 7.2).

Table 7.2: Which of these platforms do you prefer to use? (n=53)

	%
I am happy to use any platform	45.3
Zoom	39.6
Microsoft Teams	9.4
Skype	3.8
I have never used a video call platform	1.9
Total	100

Most respondents (45 per cent) said they were happy to use any platform. Two in five (40 per cent) preferred Zoom. One respondent said they would be interested in having a video call but had never done this before.

Respondents were asked what they liked about their preferred platform. Those who preferred Zoom said they found it easy to use. Comments also noted that Zoom was easy to access without the need to download software. Some participants raised concerns about the security of calls made via Zoom.

“Zoom has been simplest, but I’ve heard it’s the least secure. You can do it on the app, or on the webpage. This one seems to be least trouble.”
(interview participant)

“Zoom is the best. It seems to be the most stable with a clear image.” (survey respondent)

“Zoom is probably the easiest because you just get given a username and password and type it in and go bing! Some of them have to download different things and that can be a bit confusing for some people.” (interview participant)

Those with experience of both Zoom and Teams sometimes said that they found Teams more complicated to use than Zoom. Others preferred Teams and said they found it easy to use and thought it was more secure.

“Teams is the best, you don’t need to have a Microsoft account. I can set one up and invite anyone if I have an email address. You don’t have to download anything, the security is also a lot better than Zoom, you can’t just walk into that.” (interview participant)

As well as being easy to use, there were other video call features that were important to participants. These included a chat function and the ability to share documents. A couple of participants said they might use a function that allowed them to record the call.

Security and technical issues

Interview participants didn’t raise specific security concerns about video calls with Social Security Scotland. Some noted that they were aware of potential security issues and mentioned these in relation to specific platforms or apps.

A couple of participants said they would expect Social Security Scotland to consider privacy and security and take the necessary steps to ensure these for clients. One participant said they would search for information and reviews online about any platform Social Security Scotland would use for video calls.

“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)

Some participants said that technical issues can make video call less effective. Some said it would be important that any platform used by Social Security Scotland gives a good quality call experience.⁷

“It [which platform] doesn’t matter as long as it works. I had one experience where my sister in law had a Zoom call with her doctor. It wasn’t working and we weren’t sure what was going on.” (interview participant)

Video calls during the pandemic

The preference for video calls increased among respondents who said their preferred way to get in touch would change if they had to contact Social Security Scotland in the next two weeks. This is shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3: Increase in preference for video calls among survey respondents who changed preferences during the pandemic (n=approx. 110)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	1.8	10.4
Applying for a benefit	0	8.3
Asking about the progress of your application	0	9.3
Urgent situation relating to your claim	0	15.0
Advising a change of circumstances	0	5.6

⁷ Some participants experienced technical difficulties during video call interviews. This may have brought these issues to mind for these participants.

For making contact before the pandemic, almost none of these participants chose video call as their preferred method. For making contact in the next two weeks however, video call increased by at least 5 percentage points for every purpose. The biggest increase was for an urgent situation relating to your claim, which increased from zero to 15 per cent. Increased preference for video call among these respondents was consistent with the shift to online methods discussed in the previous chapter.

For some respondents, their first experience with video call had been during the pandemic. Respondents said video call had become an important way to stay in touch with friends and family. Some also said they had used video call to speak with their GP. Some participants also noted that video call had been a vital tool for children and students while schools, colleges and universities were closed. Many said the use of video calls for these different aspects of daily life during the pandemic had increased awareness of and confidence using the technology.

“And at the very beginning [of the pandemic] I was totally – I hadn’t used them before or Microsoft Teams. But I’m kind of a dab hand at it now.”
(interview participant)

“I’ve used video calls so much more during the pandemic and find them easy and satisfying to use.” (survey respondent)

“I feel more confident using video calls than I did before the pandemic.”
(survey respondent)

Some survey respondents and interview participants said that video calls could replace in person interactions while restrictions limited meeting people from other households.

“Where I would have preferred in person for something urgent I wouldn’t during the pandemic but would like a video call instead. This would be to reduce contact with people.” (survey respondent)

“I would prefer face-to-face contact. In the current circumstances video call is the next best thing.” (interview participant)

Some respondents said they had changed their preferences to include video calls in place of telephone calls. These respondents said that with staff working from home during the pandemic, they would expect longer wait times to speak to an adviser. Video calls were considered a quicker way to get answers to questions while this was the case.

“Given the current situation I would change to online/video chat as restricted number of staff therefore wait times on telephone would increase.” (survey respondent)

“Phone calls take ages to get through. Video calls are by appointment so much more likely to get a resolution fast.” (survey respondent)

Using video calls after the pandemic

Video call increased among respondents who said that their preferred way to get in touch would change after the pandemic. This is shown in Table 7.4.

Table 7.4: Increase in preference for video calls among survey respondents who changed preferences after the pandemic (n=approx. 93)

	Before the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Advice and general information	2.2	4.6
Applying for a benefit	2.9	4.4
Asking about the progress of your application	3.0	5.2
Urgent situation relating to your claim	3.2	5.7
Advising a change of circumstances	1.9	10.9

Preference for video call increased for all reasons for getting in touch. The largest increase was for advising a change in circumstances from 2 per cent to 11 per cent. These increases are consistent with the trend for more online communication discussed in the previous chapter.

Some respondents said their experiences during the pandemic meant they now considered it a helpful way to get in touch.

“We have got so used to doing a lot of interviews by Zoom/web chat now.”
(survey respondent)

“Have realised how useful video calls are.” (survey respondent)

Once the pandemic was no longer a serious risk to public health, some participants thought that video call would be a convenient way to have face-to-face interactions. Many of these participants had experience of disability benefits. Participants said that video call replicates the face-to-face experience and was convenient for clients who may face difficulties leaving home to travel to an appointment. One participant said that virtual meetings should replace in-person contact from now on.

“I prefer a face to face option without the need for travelling and trying to find parking and sitting in a waiting room.” (survey respondent)

“It's a good alternative to face-to-face without the hassle of organising travel logistically, financially and emotionally while still having a person you can see and who can see you which I think is important for building a rapport and trust.” (survey respondent)

“For things such as disability benefits and you would need to do an interview so instead of going and having the assessment in person then doing it via video call would be the next best thing...it means for folk like myself who have some days are worse than others then that would be ideal.” (interview participant with experience of Best Start Grant/Foods and Young Carer Grant)

“If technology can support virtual meetings on an ongoing basis, I cannot for see a situation that would require a return to actual physical attendance.”
(survey participant)

Some suggested that after the pandemic, video calls should become part of a range of options for clients to engage face-to-face with Social Security Scotland. Some comments recognised that not all clients have internet access or feel comfortable using online technology. For these clients, video calls should not replace the offer of in-person meetings or home visits.

“[Video calls have] been a positive change. But I wouldn’t like it to permanently replace, face-to-face meetings. Because the dynamics of them, like in face-to-face meetings than online – If I had the choice, I’d have a mix of online meetings or face-to-face meetings.” (interview participant)

“I think it would be a bit of both. I think we have to move forward with online. [Video calls] would save both the claimants and the government’s office money because it could be done within the home and...it would be better because you then feel more comfortable in that respect.” (interview participant)

“Social Security Scotland should consider making full use of the video and chat technologies that many people are used to using now. I appreciate a percentage of the population remain digitally excluded and so there should be provision to support these people running in tandem.” (survey respondent)

Meeting Social Security Scotland in person

In the final section of the survey, respondents said if they might ever consider meeting Social Security Scotland in person to get support with benefits (Table 8.1). This could be at a location in their community or town such as a library or third sector organisation. In person could also mean a visit at home from Social Security Scotland staff.

Table 8.1: In the future, if it was possible to interact with Social Security Scotland in person, is this something you might ever be interested in? (n=477)

	%
Yes	78.8
No	21.2
Total	100

Over three quarters (79 per cent) of respondents said they could be interested in meeting Social Security Scotland in person in the future. Around one fifth (21 per cent) said they wouldn't be interested in engaging with Social Security Scotland in person.

There were some differences between respondents based on demographic characteristics. Results for different groups can be found in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Different preferences after the pandemic – demographic characteristics

	Proportion saying they would engage with Social Security Scotland in person (%)
Disability status	
Long-term health condition or disability (n=316)	81.6
No Long-term health condition or disability (n=87)	69.0

Respondents with a long-term health condition or disability were more likely to say they would be interested in communicating in person. Among respondents with a condition or disability, 82 per cent said this is something they might consider. This is compared to around two thirds (69 per cent) of respondents who don't have a condition or disability.

Types of in-person interactions

Table 8.3 shows the proportion of survey respondents interested in different types of in person meetings.

Table 8.3: Which of these in-person interactions would you be interested in? (n=371)

	%
Either visiting a Social Security Scotland location or meeting an employee in my own home	56.3
I would meet with a Social Security Scotland employee in my own home.	21.6
I would visit a local Social Security Scotland location. (This could be in a local charitable organisation or public library).	22.1
Total	100

Over half (56 per cent) of respondents said they would consider visiting a Social Security Scotland location or arranging a meeting at home. Around one fifth (22 per cent) said they would consider a meeting at home. The same proportion (22 per cent) said they would visit a Social Security Scotland location in their area.

There were some differences between respondents based on demographic characteristics. Results for different groups can be found in Table 8.4.

Table 8.4: Meeting Social Security Scotland in person – demographic characteristics

	Proportion saying they would meet Social Security Scotland at home (%)	Proportion saying they would visit a local Social Security Scotland location (%)
Gender		
Women (n=208)	18.3	26.0
Men (n=100)	27.0	15.0
Caring status		
Has caring responsibilities (n=163)	16.0	25.8
No caring responsibilities (n=144)	26.4	17.4
Geographic location		
Urban (n=289)	20.4	21.8
Rural (n=59)	30.5	16.9

Over a quarter of women (26 per cent) said they would only consider visiting a Social Security Scotland location. Over a quarter of men (27 per cent) said they would only consider arranging a meeting at home.

Around a quarter (26 per cent) of those with caring responsibilities said they would visit a location. Around a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents who don't have caring responsibilities said they would consider meeting at home.

Around a third (31 per cent) of respondents living in a rural area said they would consider a meeting at home but not at a Social Security Scotland location. This was compared to 20 per cent of respondents in urban areas.

Meeting in person or at home

Some said that whilst they would be happy to meet in person at a location, they wouldn't be comfortable with someone visiting them at home.

Participants said they preferred to keep meetings outside the private environment of home.

“Don't like idea of a home visit though – don't like the idea of having a stranger in the house.” (interview participant)

“I would prefer to go to a location than to have someone in my home but I think both options are good because I know many people will want that, especially people with disabilities or that don't like crowds. But for me I'd prefer to go to a location to meet someone. It's more of a neutral environment, let's say, than in my home. It would make me a bit uncomfortable to have an adviser in my home.” (interview participant)

Other participants said that they would prefer home visits as it removed the need to travel. Some participants said that travel and transport could be difficult due to health conditions. Others felt that home would provide a familiar, comfortable environment to discuss their situation.

“Yeah, definitely be interested in that [meeting in person], especially coming to my home...just not having the travel times to places.” (interview participant)

“It’s easier to speak to someone when you feel comfortable which in your own environment you are, opposed to an alien environment in a government office.” (interview participant)

When meetings could take place

Some respondents said that it was important for in-person meetings to resume after the pandemic. They noted that restrictions during the pandemic had removed this choice. Some comments highlighted that in-person meetings would remain important for clients with limited access to the internet. One participant with no access to the internet at home emphasised that in-person meetings would be his preference after the pandemic.

“Face to face meetings WILL NEED to be part of communications with agencies in the future, simply because they allow a third party such as carers, family, case workers etc. to be in the meetings as well.” (survey respondent)

“While I prefer online/phone/email contacts, I think a possibility to meet person face-to-face is incredibly important for older people or people who struggle with (or do not have) technology such as computers.” (survey respondent)

“Great idea, would be ideal...If that was available, that would be Plan A.” (interview participant)

Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, respondents were asked when they would feel comfortable meeting Social Security Scotland in person.

Table 8.5: When do you think you would feel comfortable interacting with Social Security Scotland in person? (n=376)

	%
When COVID-19 is no longer a serious risk to public health and all restrictions are lifted.	67.0
When the local protection level (Tier) where I live allows me to meet people from at least one other household indoors.	19.9
While COVID-19 restrictions are in place, regardless of which local protection level (Tier) is in operation where I live.	11.2
Other	1.9
Total	100

The majority (67 per cent) said they would only feel comfortable once all restrictions related to the pandemic had been lifted. One in five (20 per cent) said they would consider in-person interactions when the restrictions in their local area allowed people from different households to mix indoors. Around one in ten (11 per cent) respondents said they would be happy to meet in person while restrictions remain in place.

Some respondents said that they wouldn't feel comfortable meeting Social Security Scotland in person while the risk of COVID-19 remained high. Some respondents said they would feel comfortable interacting with Social Security Scotland in person when case numbers were low. Others mentioned they would feel comfortable after 26 April 2021. During the research period, announcements from the Scottish Government said that restrictions on journeys in mainland Scotland would be lifted on this date. Restrictions would

also be eased for meeting people from other households outdoors and indoors.⁸

“Due to COVID-19 restrictions it is more difficult for me to get out and I do not want to put myself in danger of picking up COVID-19 from visiting offices and speaking face to face in a building.” (survey participant)

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

“I heard yesterday that the restrictions in Scotland are being lifted from the 26th of April. I would wait probably until, kind of, June or July, before I felt really comfortable going to face-to-face meetings.” (interview participant)

Many participants said that they would only feel comfortable arranging a home visit once restrictions had been eased and guidelines allowed indoor meetings between households. Some mentioned that they would only be comfortable once the number of COVID-19 cases was low. Others said they would want all restrictions to be lifted before they would take part in a home visit. Some interview participants said that they would feel comfortable after they had received their vaccination.

“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)

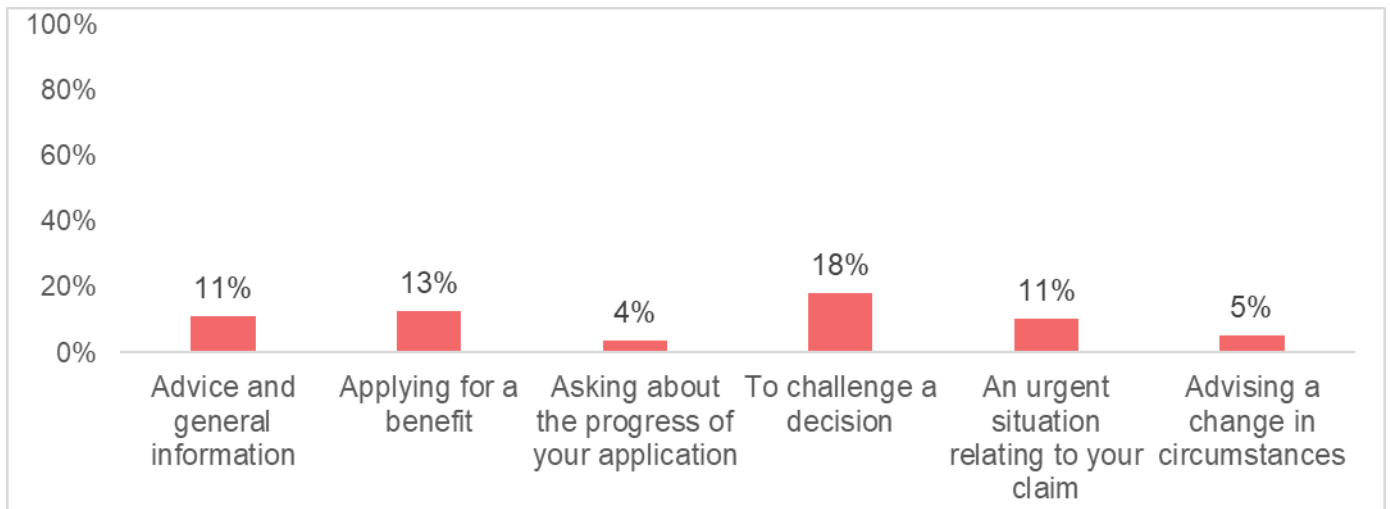
“After I have been vaccinated, I think.” (interview participant)

Purposes for meeting in person

Figure 8 shows the proportion of survey respondents who said they would prefer in-person meetings for different purposes after the pandemic.

⁸ The Scottish Government, ‘Timetable for further lockdown easing’, 16 March 2021: <https://www.gov.scot/news/timetable-for-further-lockdown-easing/>

Figure 8: Preference for in-person meetings for different purposes after the pandemic (n=approx. 484)



After the pandemic, around a fifth (18 per cent) of respondents said they would prefer to challenge a decision about an application in person. Around one in ten said they would prefer in-person communication for getting advice (11 per cent), making an application (13 per cent) or for something urgent (11 per cent).

Respondents said why they would want to get in touch with Social Security Scotland in person for a range of purposes. Some said that meeting in person was a useful way to discuss complex issues or explain detailed personal circumstances. An interview participant said sharing documents or evidence with Social Security Scotland would be easier in person. Another participant said that in-person meetings were helpful if there was a problem to report and resolve.

“I think for certain instances that [meeting in person] would be useful. If that was available to me, it’s not something I would use regularly but for something like a new claim or a very complex situation, I think sometimes sitting in front of someone with papers and discussing it, it can go faster than on the phone.” (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)

“It’s sometimes easier to speak to someone face to face. I’ve only had one problem once, it was a payment issue, it would be great to have a personal contact in that kind of situation. If you are person to person, can tell that person that you have not received the payment.” (interview participant)

Some respondents said that they felt reassured talking in person.

Respondents said that when they talk with someone in person, they felt understood and that their issues were taken seriously.

One interview participant said she would only consider meeting in person if it was urgent. This participant appreciated the opportunity to connect with someone in person during difficult times. This was echoed by some comments from survey respondents who said that in person meetings were an important option for clients experiencing a crisis in circumstances. Another participant said that they would prefer meeting in person as it would allow them to get extra support.

“I honestly think you can’t beat the personal touch and the feeling that your query or claim will actually be dealt with...If you actually see someone face to face I feel you have better chance of getting things done there and then and there is a record of what it is you are there for.” (survey respondent)

“I think face to face, either in person or online is the best way to do things, one can see reactions and gauge whether what you are saying is being understood. It is also easier than filling in hard to understand forms which these days look like a copy of war and peace in their thickness. I always find face to face more reassuring.” (survey respondent)

“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)

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

“I think whoever I was talking to [in person] would see how my disability was now affecting me and how it has progressed. This isn’t so easy to explain in a telephone call.” (survey respondent)

“The only thing that I will change will be face-to-face interview because when I applied to PIP [Personal Independence Payment], I had a meeting over the phone rather than face-to-face interview .” (interview participant)

One interview participant said that visiting a location would be a helpful way for clients who don’t have internet access to complete online forms. Another participant also highlighted that WiFi should be available for clients to use at Social Security Scotland locations.

“Not everybody’s got access to certain stuff, it would be good to have an office where you could go in to use a computer if you haven’t got a mobile.” (interview participant)

Information before visiting a location

Survey respondents said how they would like Social Security Scotland to tell them about what to expect before visiting a local location (Table 8.6).

Table 8.6: How should Social Security Scotland tell you about what to expect for a visit to a local location? (n=287)

	%
Letter	41.5
Email	39.7
SMS / Text message	8.4
Telephone call	8.0
Other	2.4
Total	100

Most survey respondents said they would want to receive a letter (42 per cent) or email (40 per cent) before visiting a Social Security Scotland location. Some respondents said they would prefer a text message (8 per cent) or a phone call (8 per cent).

In discussing the types of information that they would expect to receive before a visit, some respondents and participant used the term 'interview'. Some who have experience of disability benefits may have thought about meeting in person for a health assessment, as carried out by the DWP. Some who have experience of Universal Credit may have thought about experiences of visiting JobCentres.

For both meetings in and outside the home, most respondents said they would want information to include the time and date of the appointment. This was the key information also mentioned by interview participants. An outline of what would be discussed was also a popular suggestion. Many respondents said they would also want to know if identification or other documentation was required. Some respondents said that an estimate of how long the meeting might take would be helpful.

"The meeting time, place, agenda and any documents/evidence I may require." (survey respondent)

"Date, time, how long and what information I would require to have." (respondent)

Many respondents said they would like to see some information about who they would meet during their visit. This included the name, gender, and job title of the staff member who would conduct the meeting. Other suggestions included direct contact details and a photograph. A number of interview

participants mentioned that staff should bring identification when visiting a client at home.

“The name and gender of the person.” (survey respondent)

“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)

“I would expect them to carry some kind of identification security wise that would be a big thing for me because you are just wary of letting people into your house now.” (interview participant)

Some respondents and interview participants said they would want to know if they could bring someone to support them during their visit to a location. There were also a couple of comments related to childcare and if bringing children would be permitted.

“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)

“If it would be possible if I could bring a friend with me to support me during appointments in a Social Security Scotland location. I would want to know in advance, I don't want to be embarrassed and bring someone and I'm not allowed. I would like it to be clear cut what I am allowed to do.” (survey respondent)

“If there is childcare available or if there is a playroom in the location where I could view my child while I sat and attended the meeting.” (survey respondent)

A number of respondents and interview participants said they would want to receive information about COVID-19 safety precautions to help them prepare for a visit to a location. Some comments mentioned information on cleaning protocols and physical distancing arrangements. Some specifically said that

they would want to know whether they were expected to wear a face covering.

“Naturally I would want to know what restrictions were in place. What distance would we be apart? Has the meeting place been cleansed? And is it cleansed after each meeting. I would need to know what face protection was in [place]. I would need to know if I was in a safe environment.” (survey participant)

“Reassurance that location is COVID-19 safe, what to expect from me ([for example] wear a mask, wait outside or enter when instructed).” (survey respondent)

“I would want information sent out about that before I visited on what I could expect when I was there...I would want to know what the social distancing was and like, was there hand sanitisers and if they were going to be wearing masks and all that kind of stuff.” (interview participant)

Travel information was also suggested by many respondents. This included information about public transport links and the availability of car and bicycle parking. Some respondents said specific information about disabled parking would be helpful. A couple of respondents mentioned information about pick-up and drop-off points.

“A map with public transport information.” (survey respondent)

“Is there parking around? What’s the best way to get there by public transport? If it’s local to where I live it’s fine but if it’s further out I might not be familiar with the area. So maybe travel guides and if it’s easily accessible by bus or something like that.” (interview participant)

“It would be helpful to have information about nearest Blue Badge Parking spaces and how near they are to the venue.” (survey respondent)

Some respondents said that information about the building itself would be helpful. This included information about accessibility for example whether there are stairs, the availability of lifts and toilet facilities. Some respondents mentioned information about the environment in the location such as

temperature, noise and lighting. Other comments said a guide to the general layout of the building would be beneficial.

“What accessibility is available, wheelchair ramp, electric doors, feedback loop, quiet area etc.” (survey respondent)

“I'd need detailed information (possibly even a walkthrough video, those are great) about the building, walking distances, lifts, ramps, toilets, noise levels, [and] light levels.” (survey respondent)

“Exact layout, so I know where to go in a building.” (survey respondent)

“As an autistic person it would be extremely helpful to have a visual guide to the building with photos of the entrance and where I am to wait, and a photo of the security badge I'm to look out for. This helps me to reduce my anxiety when accessing new places.” (survey respondent)

Safety measures when meeting Social Security Scotland in person

During the pandemic, the Scottish Government has introduced a range of safety measures to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Respondents and participants were asked about what safety measures they would expect to see when engaging with Social Security Scotland in person.

Safety measures at Social Security Scotland locations

Survey respondents were asked how long a range of six COVID-19 safety precautions should be in place at Social Security Scotland locations.

Respondents said if a measure should be in place from now on, or only while

COVID-19 restrictions are in place. Some respondents said that some measures should not be implemented (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1: Survey respondents views on safety measures at Social Security Scotland locations (n=289)

	From now on, this should always be in place (%)	While COVID-19 restrictions are in place (%)	Never (%)	Don't know (%)	Total (%)
Availability of hand sanitiser	21.0	76.9	1.7	0.3	100*
Access to hand washing facilities	16.3	78.9	2.4	2.4	100
Physical distancing (ability to stay at a safe distance from others)	39.1	55.0	1.7	4.2	100
Face coverings or Personal Protective Equipment for me to use	79.5	12.5	5.6	2.4	100
Screens/shields (e.g. at desks)	58.1	36.3	3.1	2.4	100
Staff wearing a face covering or other Personal Protective Equipment	79.7	12.4	4.8	3.1	100*

*n=290

Around three quarters (79 per cent) of respondents said that while restrictions are in place, there should be access to hand washing facilities. A similar number (77 per cent) said hand sanitiser should be available. Over half (55 per cent) said physical distancing should be maintained while restrictions remain in place. These figures are highlighted in bold in Table 9.1.

The majority (80 per cent) of respondents said that from now on, staff and clients should wear a face covering. Over half (58 per cent) said there should be screens or shields, for example at desks. These figures are highlighted in bold in Table 9.1.

Between 2 and 6 per cent of respondents said that the safety measures didn't need to be in place.

Views about safety measures

Some participants said that they expected the risks of COVID-19 to be part of life for some time to come. These participants said safety measures should remain in place into the future. One participant said that it was important to remain cautious to avoid a rise in case numbers.

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

“Well I think they [safety measures] should always be there because I think we're just going to have to learn to live with and adapt to it. I don't think the Coronavirus is going to go away. It will always be prevalent in society, we just have to minimise the risks as much as we can.” (interview participant)

“I've got to be honest, I don't think we should drop them too soon as cases can pick up quickly and easily.” (interview participant)

Other interview participants said it would be safe to remove precautions after the pandemic. Some noted that this would depend on things like: government guidance, lifting of all restrictions, roll-out of the vaccination programme or low case numbers.

“All the preventative measures they can have, they must have. After everyone has received the jab...then that will be ok, if not, all the things we

are doing now, until then the routine must continue...When we've had the two vaccines then it will be much easier." (interview participant)

"The government guidance should precede. By the end of this year, I hope we'll be going back to normal. I think masks will still be prevalent but more in crowded places and airplanes." (interview participant)

"If the risk is reduced and the World Health Organisation says it's safe to remove the safety measures. Once there is less risk factor, then would be a good time to remove the safety measures, [but] some people would like to still use the face mask and hand sanitiser." (interview participant)

Some respondents said that rules should take into consideration that for some people, face coverings can be a barrier to communication. Instead of face masks, suggestions said visors or screens may be more appropriate for some clients. One respondent said that face coverings should be optional once restrictions have been lifted.

"I'm not sure about face coverings, as it is difficult to tell and express facial expressions while wearing a mask. A screen should be sufficient." (survey respondent)

"As I have a hearing impairment I rely on being able to see a person talking so masks will always be a problem as they restrict my ability to see someone talking." (survey respondent)

"I think protective measures such as face coverings and physical distancing should be available to staff and clients at all times if desired. But it should be a choice once restrictions have been lifted." (survey participant)

Other suggestions for safety measures included staggered appointment times to avoid crowded waiting areas. Some comments suggested a one-way system for moving around a location.

Comments also noted that signage or markers could be used to help visitors maintain distance. Some respondents noted that in addition to distance,

ventilation was important. Suggestions included open windows and that meetings shouldn't be held in rooms with limited or confined space. Some said these measures should be taken while restrictions are in place. Others said they should be in effect from now on.

“Floor markers to follow when visiting so to avoid close contact with others while COVID-19 restrictions are in place, signs throughout the location and at the entrance showing what to expect before entering the building so individuals are fully prepared and safe. (All during COVID-19 restrictions in place).” (survey participant)

“When COVID-19 restrictions are lifted...I don't necessarily think that social distancing needs to be in place as it is now, but I think more spacing than is traditionally given needs to be provided for. Often times waiting rooms are cramped and they shouldn't be, especially if the potential of COVID-19 is to be the new normal.” (survey respondent)

“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 participant)

Respondents also said that they would expect regular cleaning to take place, especially of frequently-touched surfaces. A couple of respondents mentioned that automatic doors can avoid the need to touch door handles.

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

“Enhanced cleaning should remain in place and hand gel/washing facilities should remain also. For physical access and reduction of hand touch surfaces more automatic doors should be considered to make mobility easier and safer for disabled staff and customers.” (survey participant)

Lastly, a few respondents said that health checks could be used as a precaution. Screening questions, temperature checks, tests, and proof of vaccination status were all mentioned.

Safety measures during home visits

Respondents were asked what kinds of safety measures they would want in place if a Social Security Scotland employee were to visit them at home. Interview participants who said that they might consider this option in the future also gave feedback about safety precautions. The majority mentioned at least one precaution, many listed several measures. One interview participant said that no special safety measures would be needed for a home visit.

Masks or personal protective equipment (PPE) were the most frequently mentioned precaution. Respondents and participants said they would expect staff visiting their home to wear a mask. Many noted that they would also wear one during the visit. One survey respondent said that visiting staff should wear medical-grade masks. One participant said that clients should have the ability to refuse entry to staff who cannot wear a mask due to health reasons. Another participant said staff should carry proof that they are exempt from wearing a mask if appropriate.

“That during COVID-19 restrictions, employee will wear a face mask throughout interview (as I would).” (survey participant)

“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)

“I think the person coming to the house would need to wear a mask and be two metres away.” (interview participant)

Hand sanitiser or hand washing was also mentioned by many respondents. Suggestions included staff carrying their own supply or using sanitiser provided by the client. Some respondents also mentioned that staff could wear gloves.

“Both staff and clients should use hand sanitisation at the beginning of the meeting, also any other persons present during the meeting.” (survey participant)

“I would expect a staff member visiting me to wear a face covering during their visit and to apply sanitiser to their hands too.” (survey respondent)

Maintaining physical distance was also important for many respondents. Some mentioned the two metre rule, or keeping six feet apart where possible. Some respondents said that any physical contact, such as handshakes, should also be prohibited. Feedback also mentioned increasing ventilation at home for example, by opening windows. Some also said they would be happy to conduct the visit outside in their garden to allow for distancing and fresh air.

“No need for physical contact (even after COVID-19 restrictions as not everyone feels comfortable shaking hands, etc.).” (survey respondent)

“I would see them outside in the garden. So they would need to bring a very warm jacket...If inside I would open the windows in the room we were going to sit in. In much the same way as smoking is not permitted for home visits now, and mentioned on NHS letters, the same focus on ventilation should be made now.” (survey participant)

“Just a distance to set us apart and hand sanitiser. If it’s a nice day we can sit outside.” (interview participant)

Some participants said employees visiting their home should provide proof of vaccination status. Others also thought staff should be regularly tested and be able to show proof of a recent negative test.

“That staff have been tested and vaccinated and proof of these available.” (survey participant)

“To know that you [staff] hadn’t had a recent COVID-19 case, hadn’t recently tested positive for COVID-19.” (interview participant)

The majority of respondents said they would still expect some safety measures to be taken, even after restrictions were eased or removed. Interview participants also said they would expect safety measures to continue for home visits. Participants emphasised that face masks would continue to be particularly important.

“...once restrictions are lifted, I would expect the employee to wear a mask if I requested it and to do their best to keep physically distant.” (survey respondent)

“[It] might be that wearing masks becomes the norm.” (survey respondent)

“Well I have had my first jag and I get the next one in May so I am hoping that I am going to be immune but I would still expect them to wear a mask and maybe an apron, I would probably wear a mask too, safety wise.” (interview participant)

What's next?

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Experience Panels in the design and development of Scotland's social security system. Research with Client Panels will continue to provide insight about clients' experience and support Social Security Scotland's continuous improvement.

The findings in this report will be used by teams working in a range of areas in both Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland.

Insights about communication preferences and views about meeting Social Security Scotland in person will inform the design and delivery of local delivery services. These services provide help and support to clients in their local areas across Scotland. This includes promoting the take-up of Social Security Scotland benefits and supporting clients through the application process.

Where clients prefer in person interactions either in a venue or in their own home, measures are in place to relieve concerns and reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection and transmission. This includes guidance and PPE products. Safety checklists are also used to prompt safety discussions. Checklists cover things like the ability to maintain physical distance and ensure clients and their household members are not displaying signs of COVID-19 or not self-isolating.

Social Security Scotland staff involved in meeting clients in person are encouraged to enable the NHS Protect Scotland app on their mobiles during working hours. These staff are also encouraged to consider regular lateral flow testing using the free kits available to the whole Scottish population.

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

The research will also be helpful for work 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 and deliver the next stage of the design of consultations for Adult Disability Payment. This includes the development of telephone and video call options. Insights about safety measures when meeting in person will also be used to design and deliver in-person appointments.

Annex A: About survey respondents

Where possible, information from the survey was matched to demographic information supplied previously by participants. For Experience Panel members, information was matched to responses given in the ‘About Your Benefits and You’ and ‘Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far’ surveys.⁹ For Client Panel members, information was matched to responses given in the ‘Social Security Scotland Client Survey: 2018-2020’.¹⁰

The following demographic information is included to give context to the findings from the survey. Linking was not possible where there was missing or unclear information. The tables show proportions based on available information and the total number of respondents is given as (n) in the table title.

Two thirds of survey respondents (66 per cent) identified as female. One third (32 per cent) identified as male.

Table A1: Gender of survey respondents (n=408)

	%
Female	65.9
Male	31.9
Other	1.0
Prefer not to say	1.2
Total	100

⁹ Scottish Government (2017) Social Security Experience Panels: About Your Benefits and You – Quantitative Research Findings: www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/11/7769/ and Scottish Government (2018) Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083/.

¹⁰ Social Security Scotland (2020) Client Survey 2018-2020: [Social Security Scotland – Client Survey Report](#)

Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) were aged 45 to 59. Around one fifth (23 per cent) were aged 44 or under and around a third (30 per cent) were aged 60 or over.

Table A2: Age of survey respondents (n=401)

	%
Under 25	1.5
25 – 44	21.4
45 – 59	46.6
60 – 79	29.7
80 or over	0.2
Prefer not to say	0.5
Total	100

Almost all survey respondents were White (96 per cent). Around 3 per cent of respondents were from a minority ethnic group.¹¹

Table A3: Ethnicity of respondents (n=333)

	%
White	95.8
Ethnic minority	3.3
Prefer not to say	0.9
Total	100

Most respondents (78 per cent) had a disability or long-term health condition.

¹¹ The 2011 census in Scotland found that 4.0% of the population identify as belonging to Asian, African, Caribbean or Black, Mixed or Other ethnic groups. Scotland's Census, 'Ethnicity', (June 2021): <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/ethnicity/>

Table A4: Respondents with a disability or long-term health condition (n=411)

	%
Has a disability or long-term health condition	78.1
No condition	21.4
Prefer not to say	0.5
Total	100

More than half of respondents (53 per cent) had a mobility impairment. More than a third had a dexterity (39 per cent) or a memory (34 per cent) impairment.

Table A5: Types of disability or long-term health conditions (n=321)¹²

	%
Mobility impairment	53.1
Dexterity	38.1
Memory	33.5
Learning/understanding/concentration	28.3
Hearing	10.1
Vision	7.6
Social or behavioral	2.2
Stamina	1.4
Has another kind of disability or long-term health condition	6.3
Prefer not to say	2.2
None of the above	0.3

¹² The percentage is of total respondents, not disabled respondents. Respondents were able to select multiple disability types.

Around half of respondents (46 per cent) said they were a carer.

Table A6: Respondents' caring status (n=409)¹³

	%
Not a carer	52.8
Carer	45.5
Prefer not to say	1.7
Total	100

Most survey respondents lived in an urban area (82 per cent).¹⁴

Table A7: Location of respondents (n=450)

	%
Urban	81.8
Rural	18.2
Total	100

Survey respondents had experience of claiming or helping someone else to claim a wide range of benefits. Table A8 shows the totals for Experience Panels respondents. The most common benefits claimed were Personal Independence Payment (76 per cent) and Disability Living Allowance (63 per cent).

¹⁴ 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.

Table A8: Experience Panels respondents' benefit experience¹⁵ (n=348)

	%
Personal Independence Payment	75.6
Disability Living Allowance	62.9
Carer's Allowance	40.2
Cold Weather Payment	37.6
Winter Fuel Payment	37.6
Discretionary Housing Payment	23.9
Universal Credit	21.3
Attendance Allowance	18.7
Scottish Welfare Fund	17.0
Severe Disablement Allowance	15.5
Best Start Grant/Foods	2.0

Table A9 shows the totals for Client Panels respondents. The most common benefit claimed was Best Start Grant/Foods (71 per cent).

Table A9: Client Panels respondents' benefit experience (n=63)

	%
Best Start Grant/Foods	71.4
Carer's Allowance Supplement	44.4
Funeral Support Payment	22.2
Young Carer Grant	9.5

¹⁵ Respondents had experience of applying for (themselves or someone else) or receiving these benefits within the last three years, but were not necessarily in receipt of the benefit at the time of the survey.

Annex B: About interview participants

Survey respondents were invited to take part in an interview as outlined on page 17. Information from the survey was matched to demographic information supplied previously by participants, as outlined on page 98.

The following demographic information is included to give context to the findings described in the report. Where information is not held this has been indicated in the tables under 'unknown'.

Over half of interview participants (56 per cent) identified as female. More than a third (37 per cent) identified as male.

Table B1: Gender of interview participants (n=41)

	%
Female	56.1
Male	36.6
Unknown	7.3
Total	100

Around one third (34 per cent) of interview participants were aged under 44. Around one quarter (29 per cent) were aged between 45 and 59 and one quarter (27 per cent) were aged between 60 and 79.

Table B2: Age of interview participants (n=41)

	%
Under 25	9.8
25 – 44	24.4
45 – 59	29.3
60 – 79	26.8
Unknown	9.8
Total	100

Almost all interview participants were White (85 per cent). Around 5 per cent were from a minority ethnic group.¹⁶

Table B3: Ethnicity of interview participants (n=41)

	%
White	85.4
Ethnic minority	4.8
Unknown	9.8
Total	100

Half of participants (51 per cent) did not have a disability or long-term health condition.

¹⁶ The 2011 census in Scotland found that 4.0% of the population identify as belonging to Asian, African, Caribbean or Black, Mixed or Other ethnic groups. Scotland's Census, 'Ethnicity', (June 2021): <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/ethnicity/>

Table B4: Participants with a disability or long-term health condition (n=41)

	%
Has a disability or long-term health condition	43.9
No condition	51.2
Unknown	4.9
Total	100

Among those participants with a disability or long-term health condition, around three quarters had an impairment which affects mobility (78 per cent) or dexterity (72 per cent).

Table B5: Types of disability or long-term health conditions (n=18)¹⁷

	%
Mobility impairment	77.8
Dexterity	72.2
Memory	44.4
Learning/understanding/concentration	38.9
Hearing	22.2
Vision	16.7
Social or behavioral	16.7
Stamina	11.1
Has another kind of disability or long-term health condition	22.2
Prefer not to say	5.6

¹⁷ Respondents were able to select multiple disability types.

Just over a third of participants (37 per cent) said they were a carer.

Table B6: Participants' caring status (n=41)

	%
Not a carer	58.5
Carer	36.6
Unknown	4.9
Total	100

Most participants lived in an urban area (78 per cent). Around one in five participants lived in a rural area.¹⁸

Table B7: Location of participants (n=41)

	%
Urban	78.0
Rural	22.0
Total	100

Interview participants had experience of claiming or helping someone else to claim a wide range of benefits. Table B8 shows benefit experience for Experience Panels participants. The most common benefits claimed were Disability Living Allowance (71 per cent) and Personal Independence Payment (64 per cent).

¹⁸ 17 per cent of the Scottish population lives in a rural area. Scottish Government (2018), *Rural Scotland Key Facts 2018*: www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00541327.pdf.

**Table B8: Experience Panels interview participants' benefit experience¹⁹
(n=14)**

	%
Disability Living Allowance	71.4
Personal Independence Payment	64.3
Winter Fuel Payment	64.3
Cold Weather Payment	50.0
Carer's Allowance	28.6
Severe Disablement Allowance	28.6
Discretionary Housing Payment	21.4
Universal Credit	21.4
Attendance Allowance	14.3
Scottish Welfare Fund	14.3

Table B9 shows benefit experience for Client Panels interview participants. The most common benefit claimed by was Best Start Grant/Foods (60 per cent).

Table B9: Client Panels interview participants' benefit experience (n=25)

	%
Best Start Grant/Foods	60.0
Carer's Allowance Supplement	56.0
Funeral Support Payment	24.0
Young Carer Grant	20.0

¹⁹ Respondents had experience of applying for (themselves or someone else) or receiving these benefits within the last three years, but were not necessarily in receipt of the benefit at the time of the survey.

Annex C: Supplementary tables

Communication preferences

Table C1: Survey respondents' preferred ways to get in touch for advice and general information (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	50.2	47.4	44.5
Video call	2.5	4.4	4.6
Web chat	24.7	29.9	29.0
In person	9.8	6.5	11.1
Paper form/post	9.8	8.4	7.9
Social media	2.9	3.4	2.9

Table C2: Survey respondents' preferred ways to make an application (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	16.6	17.9	15.4
Video call	2.9	4.8	4.4
In person	13.6	8.4	12.7
Online form	43.8	49.4	47.1
Paper form/post	23.1	19.5	20.4

Table C3: Survey respondents' preferred ways to get in touch about progress updates (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	50.5	46.8	45.8
Video call	2.9	5.1	5.2
Web chat	19.2	24.1	23.2
In person	4.4	2.5	3.8
Paper form/post	5.9	3.8	4.8
Social media	0.2	0.4	0.4
SMS	16.8	17.3	16.7

Table C4: Survey respondents' preferred ways to get in touch to challenge a decision (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	34.5	38.5	34.6
In person	17.6	14.1	18.4
Paper form/post	47.9	47.3	47.0

Table C5: Survey respondents' preferred ways to get in touch about an urgent situation (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	69.3	64.8	62.8
Video call	3.2	6.6	5.7
Web chat	16.1	20.5	19.4
In person	9.5	6.4	10.5
Paper form/post	1.5	1.3	1.3
Social media	0.4	0.4	0.4

Table C6: Survey respondents' preferred ways to get in touch to advise a change in circumstances (n=approx. 484)

	Before the pandemic (%)	During the pandemic (%)	After the pandemic (%)
Phone	39.0	35.7	34.9
Video call	1.9	3.2	4.0
Web chat	7.6	10.4	10.3
In person	4.6	3.6	5.3
Online form	37.1	37.6	36.8
Paper form/post	9.7	9.5	8.8

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- Are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- May be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact socialsecurityexperience@gov.scot further information.
- Cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

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