

EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Experience Panels - Seldom Heard Programme of Research: Vulnerable Groups

Background



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.



We recognised that there are groups less likely to be represented on the Experience Panels so we set up the “Seldom Heard Voices” research programme. It ensures that groups who need to be treated with particular sensitivity, are marginalised or dispersed have a voice in the design of Scotland’s social security service.

There are four groups which are identified as ‘Seldom Heard’ in this research programme. They are:



Mobile Populations



Vulnerable Groups



End of Life



Carers and Care Experienced

About the research



For each of the four groups, two stages of research are being carried out. This summary sets out the findings from the first stage of research with the Vulnerable Groups.

Vulnerable Groups include the following:

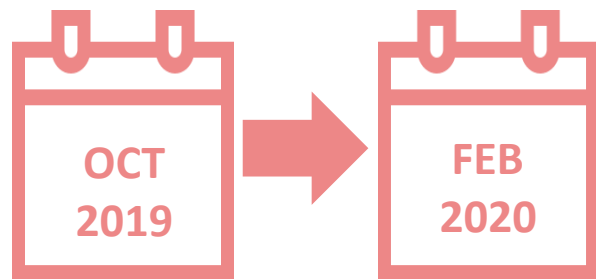
 <p>People experiencing homelessness</p>	 <p>Military veterans</p>	 <p>People living with HIV or Hepatitis C</p>
---	--	--

The research was carried out in face-to-face interviews, and then by video calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

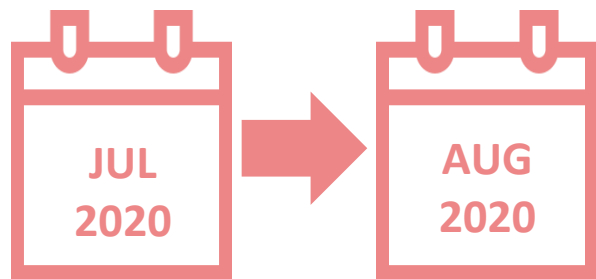


20
Interviews

The research took place between



and between



The research explored views on:



Social security services in general



The current benefits system



What the social security system should be like in Scotland

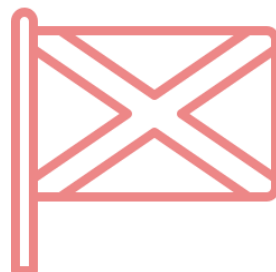
About the research participants

Most participants were aged between

45 – 70

years old

Almost all participants had a physical or mental health condition



Respondents took part from **9** Geographical areas in Scotland

Common barriers



For many participants, finding out about which benefits they are entitled to was difficult. They did not know where to get information from.



Due to a lack of face-to-face support, the online benefits system was difficult to understand for some participants.



Many participants stated that they found the benefit applications difficult to fill in, because the language used was complicated or the forms were too long.



Participants also found application forms difficult because the questions did not allow participants to speak about their individual circumstances.



Many participants needed help from third sector organisations to fill in the forms.



Some participants felt stigmatised and discriminated against when they talked to staff from the Department for Work and Pensions.



Some participants felt that the assessment reports were wrong and unfair. This is because their medical histories were not correctly reported during health assessments.



Health assessment staff were perceived as poorly trained or insensitive to participants who had experienced trauma or mental health issues.



Some participants experienced gaps in payments when moving from one benefit to another benefit (in particular with Universal Credit payments). This caused financial difficulties.

“The benefits system just now is set up where it’s so hard...it’s confusing when you go to deal with it and my brain can’t cope with that...all the websites...to find out information... it’s hard work, especially with people with mental health problems...it’s really hard to take in”.¹

[Homeless participant]



¹ Where quotation marks are used in excerpts (“...”), this indicates direct quotations of participants as recorded by the research contractor. All other text included in excerpts represents the summarised note taking of the interviewer.

Main challenges concerning specific groups

People experiencing homelessness



Homeless participants reported getting the least amount of help from third sector organisations.



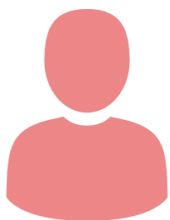
Many participants felt their mental health worsened when interacting with DWP and assessment staff.



Personal Independence Payment assessments made participants feel stressed, stigmatised and stereotyped. Assessment staff seemed to have poor training in mental health issues.



Lump sum payments created difficulties with financial budgeting.



“I felt like a 2 year old sitting there and it [PIP assessment] was like an interrogation... you're no treated like a human being. She wasnae caring....it was like she was resentful that you're getting benefits....you could feel it just the way she was looking...it was like, 'why the **** should you get this and you're no working'.”

[Homeless participant]

Military Veterans



Some veterans felt there was a ‘right’ way to fill in application forms that was unknown to them. They felt the forms were designed to ‘trick you’, to stop people making successful claims. They relied on third sector organisations to help them fill in forms the ‘right’ way.



Participants were critical of the Personal Independence Payment assessments. They were perceived as too rigid to enable participants to explain their complex mental and physical health problems.



The assessments also had an impact on their mental health. They reported feeling “humiliated” and “disbelieved” by assessors.



When assessment reports came through, participants felt the official report bore little or only partial relation to what was discussed and observed during the assessment.



Those who went through the Personal Independence Payment appeals process were helped by third sector organisations. Many mentioned their inability to go through the stress of an appeal or tribunal without this support.

The report from the assessor didn't appear to bear much relation to what had been discussed in the assessment: neither the respondent nor the support worker felt it reflected his situation at all...

[Veteran participant]



People living with HIV or Hepatitis C



A few participants felt that application forms and assessments did not enable them to explain the variability and fluctuation of their health conditions.



Many participants found application forms for certain benefits too difficult to fill in without the support from third sector organisations.



Participants felt that Personal Independence Payment assessments and tribunals were stressful and humiliating.



Several participants felt that the renewals process for certain benefits was becoming more frequent. This caused greater financial uncertainty and stress.



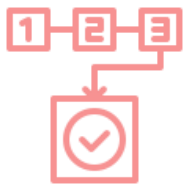
Participants experienced financial stress and difficulties because of gaps and irregular benefit payments. This occurred with Universal Credit payments and mandatory reconsideration when moved from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment.

“[When claiming PIP, the DWP] treated me like a criminal, like I was a scrounger. They don’t help people.”

[People living with HIV or Hepatitis C]



Views on improving the benefit system



Participants wanted it to be easier to understand what benefits they were eligible for.



Participants would like the application forms to be simpler, and to use clearer language.



Many participants suggested more reliance of medical evidence for the decisions on the health assessments.



Some participants suggested the DWP staff should have training to help them treat vulnerable people with respect and understanding.



Many participants supported the idea of local delivery services from Social Security Scotland. They also thought that service delivery staff need to be caring, professionally trained and good listeners.

It should be easier to find out what benefits you might be eligible for.

[Veteran participant]



Next Steps



The Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland will carry out (or has already carried out) actions to address the barriers, and views of improvement, that vulnerable groups had.



Barriers on finding information and filling in application forms have been fed into the provision of inclusive communication approaches. Social Security Scotland provides clear, transparent and accessible information.



The design of Social Security Scotland benefit application forms has also been developed with people experiencing the benefits.



Social Security Scotland offers a range of ways to apply for, and access support to the benefits they deliver. These include: online, telephone, paper-based or face-to-face.



Experiences of stigma within the benefits system are addressed in [Social Security Scotland's Charter](#), to ensure that fairness, dignity and respect are embedded in the new system.



Insights on the key role of third sector organisations will inform engagement with advocacy organisations to address barriers to benefit take-up and provide organisations with accurate information on benefits to their clients.



© Crown copyright 2022

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence.

To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or e-mail: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

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

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

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80435-067-6

Published by the Scottish Government, February 2022