

EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Experience Panels: Seldom Heard Programme of Research: Mobile Populations

Background

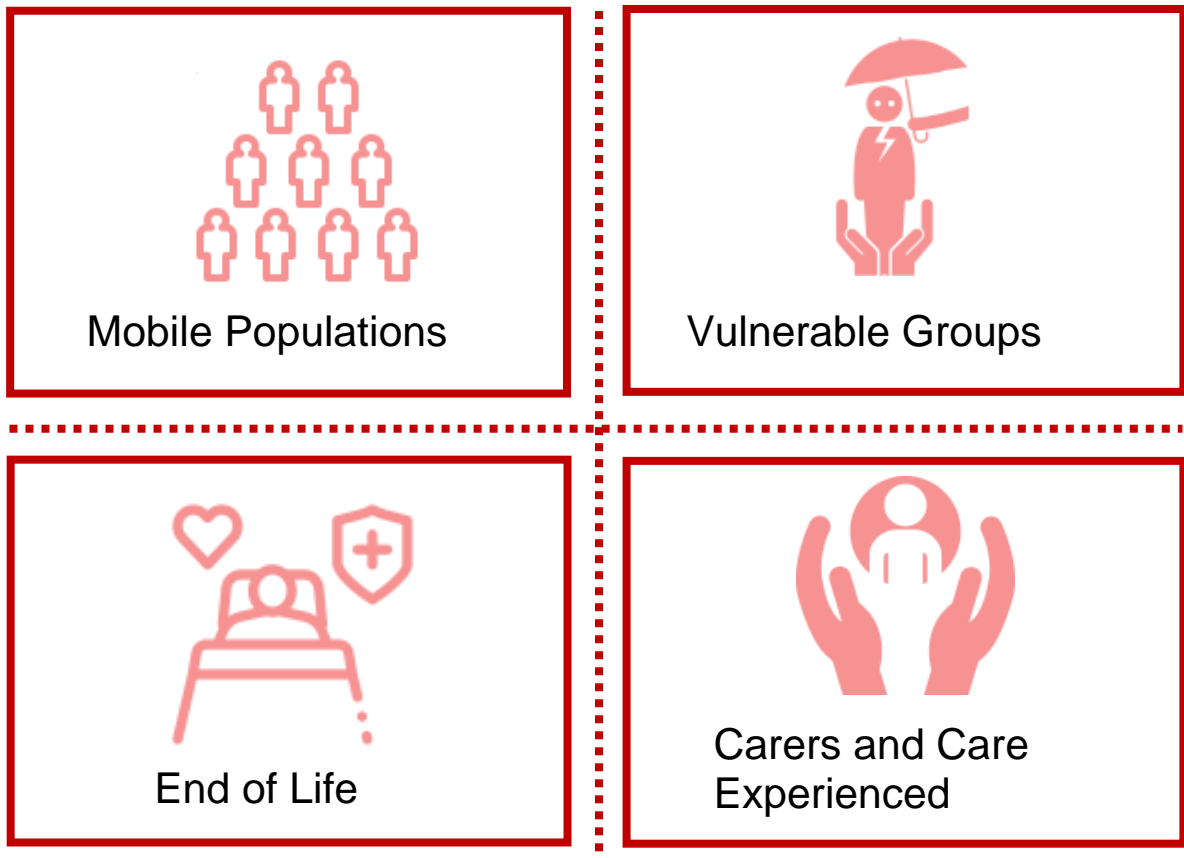


The Experience Panels were established in 2017 to help design a social security system that works for the people of Scotland. Members have experience of at least one of the benefits delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that has or will come to Scotland.



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 services.

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



About the research



For each of the four groups, two stages of research were carried out. This summary sets out the findings from the two stages of research with Mobile Populations.

The Mobile Populations group includes the following:

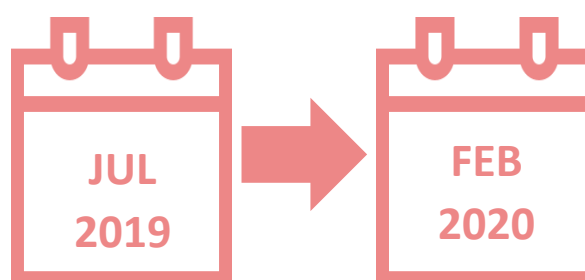


The first stage of the research was carried out in face-to-face interviews, and then by telephone calls due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research involved 30 participants: 10 Gypsy/Travellers, 10 seasonal migrant workers, and 10 refugees.



29 interviews
with **30**
participants

The research took place between




and in



The research explored views on:



Government services in general



The current benefits system



The future of social security in Scotland

About the research participants

Most participants were aged between

25 – 54

years old

Twenty participants had a disability, long-term and/or mental health condition.



17

Female



13

Male

Common barriers



Some participants felt they could not find correct information on benefits and eligibility from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus.



Many felt the benefit system was complex and difficult to understand.



Participants thought the structure and the wording of applications forms were repetitive, prescriptive and long. Some felt that forms were purposefully designed to make it hard to get successful benefit claims.



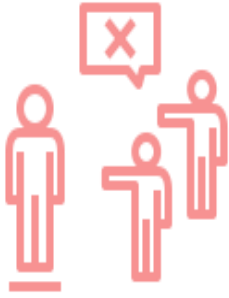
A few highlighted that benefit processes and interactions with Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus staff intensified their mental health problems.



Some highlighted barriers to access information and apply for benefits online because they did not have internet access or digital devices.



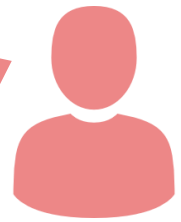
Many participants reported long waiting times during some benefit application processes. The long waiting times caused them financial difficulties.



Participants reported feeling stigmatised, misunderstood, judged and discriminated against by the DWP and Jobcentre Plus staff. Many indicated that there is stigma attached when applying for benefits. They also felt discriminated against because of being a Gypsy/Traveller, a refugee or a European citizen.

He described how accessing information regarding benefits was really difficult: “I visited 8-9 places to find information”. This was compounded by his view regarding the “incompetent advisers” at the DWP who gave him conflicting information regarding the benefits system and what he was eligible for.¹

[Seasonal migrant worker]



Main challenges concerning specific groups

Gypsy/Travellers



All participants had mental health conditions. Dealing with benefit staff and with benefit processes exacerbated them.

¹ Where quotation marks are used in excerpts (“...”), this indicates direct quotations of participants. All other text included in excerpts represents the summarised note taking of the interviewer. Excerpts of interview notes are used to provide relevant case studies of participants experiences.



Most participants felt that government services have a derogatory attitude towards the travelling community. Some did not trust staff from services as a result of previous experiences in which they felt discriminated against.



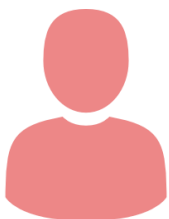
Gypsy/Travellers felt the benefit system was complex and difficult to navigate.



Participants reported that the questions in application forms and assessments were designed to stop people from making successful benefit applications.



All participants indicated the need for specialised support from third sector organisations to navigate different aspects of the benefit system. Many mentioned that their need for this support was intensified by their lack of literacy skills.



She is unable to read or write. This “makes life difficult” and she relies heavily on assistance from MECOPP staff, including in helping deal with issues around welfare benefits and communicating with DWP.

[Gypsy/Traveller]

Refugees



Refugees said that support workers from local authorities helped them to access information, identify their eligibility of benefits, and complete application forms.



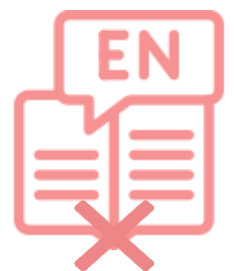
Some participants received help from third sector organisations with getting information and completing applications.



Some felt that having mandatory job search activities in order to access benefits was inflexible.



A few refugees mentioned that benefit advisers have been indifferent to their mental health issues and experiences of trauma.



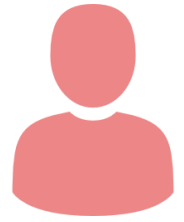
Some perceived that benefit advisors were not sympathetic towards their limited English proficiency.



Refugees have a strong reliance on translators and interpreting services to communicate with benefit staff.

He felt that the DWP would rather have people in work; especially as he felt that the agency adviser was dismissive of his mental health history and had suggested that keeping the mind busy in work would help with mental health problems. He felt that this grossly misses the point regarding the trauma he has experienced.

[Refugee]



Seasonal migrant workers



Most participants needed to access the benefit system as a result of their irregular paid employment conditions.



Some were not able to provide evidence regarding paid work to be eligible for some benefits.



Seasonal migrant workers felt that benefit staff did not provide them with accurate benefit information, careers advice or job opportunities.



Some felt that the appointments at the Jobcentre were interrogations of job searching activities and not meetings to support them getting into employment.



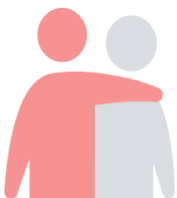
Participants highlighted the support from community organisations and friends with benefit processes.



As the work is never guaranteed and precarious, he can often not have any employment opportunities so has had to claim various benefits since 2012 including Job Seekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and more recently Universal Credit.

[Seasonal migrant worker]

Views on improving the benefit system



Participants emphasised that the benefit system needs to be compassionate in their support of benefit applicants.



Several participants emphasised the need for benefit staff to be suitably trained to understand the specific circumstances of different groups.



Some mentioned the need for benefit staff to be approachable, empathetic, patient and friendly.



Third sector organisations which advocate and work on the specific needs of Mobile Population groups contributed to positive experiences with the benefit system.



Participants said that they would like communication on information and applications of benefits using various methods suited to their individual circumstances and preferences.



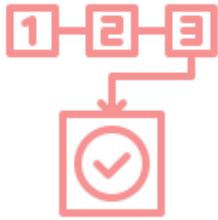
Many said that they preferred to access support face-to-face. They mentioned this support can be provided in a specific location, local libraries or at home.



Refugees and seasonal migrant worker participants highlighted the support they required from translators and interpreters so they can explain their particular circumstances more clearly.



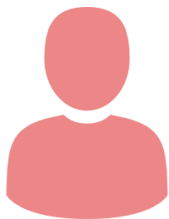
Some participants mentioned that the benefit system needs to be designed with more flexibility to consider their specific and complex circumstances.



Some participants suggested that application processes need to be simplified.



Some suggested shortening waiting times of application processes and payments so they could help clients to avoid financial difficulties.



She would like to see some improvements made over timings, speed [...] key improvement is time taken to process – “not acceptable” at the moment, resulted in financial problems and made her feel anxious and worried.

[Gypsy/Traveller]

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 Mobile Populations had.



Insights on access to information and knowledge of the benefit system has fed into the provision of inclusive communication approaches. Social Security Scotland provides transparent and accessible information. There are two [take-up strategies](#) that set out all the activity being undertaken to ensure awareness about benefits improves.



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



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



Social Security Scotland's [Charter](#) ensures that dignity, fairness and respect are embedded in the new system and in clients' interactions with staff.



Insights on the key role third sector organisations play in supporting clients is informing engagement with these organisations. This will address barriers to benefit take-up and provide organisations with accurate information on benefits for their clients.



Preferences for face-to-face services fed into the development of the Local Delivery service in local communities across Scotland. This service provides a local presence to meet people's needs in key locations where clients attend and through home visits.



Social Security Scotland is committed to offer interpretation services in any preferred language, in person, over the telephone, or via a video call. Translations services is also offered in any preferred language.



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