social research

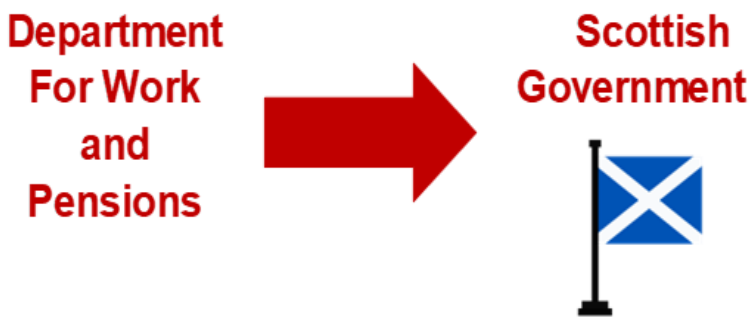
Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Experience Panels: Carers with English as a second language

Background

The Scottish Government is now responsible for some of the benefits previously delivered by the UK Government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). As part of the work to prepare for this change, in 2017 the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels.



Members have experience of at least one of the benefits delivered by the DWP that has come to Scotland. Over 2,400 people registered to take part in the Experience Panels when they were launched. As Social Security Scotland is now an established agency and the majority of benefits are live, the Experience Panels will close in April 2024.

We recognise that there are some groups less likely to be represented on the Experience Panels. This visual summary presents the findings from a research event with carers who have English as a

second language, who were recruited externally to the Experience Panels through our community partner, Happy to Translate.

This summary continues work to support the development of Carer Support Payment (formerly known as Scottish Carers Assistance), the payment which will replace the DWP-delivered Carer's Allowance. Previous work on this topic can be found in the Social Security Experience Panels: Scottish Carers Assistance report.

About the research

The research event was held in Glasgow in March 2023. The event was split into two sessions. One was organised by the Experience Panels, and the second by User Research[1].

Nine focus groups were held during the Experience Panel's session, with 54 participants taking part in total.

Participants were drawn from four different language groups: Cantonese, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu.

Focus groups explored participants' views and experiences as carers with English as a second language, including:

- Barriers they faced when interacting with Social Security Scotland or other support organisations.
- Any experiences of receiving Carer's Allowance.

[1] User Research are a separate team who work on developing the user experience for the products and services of Social Security Scotland clients. Their session at this research event focused on application processes, communication preferences, and previous interactions with carer benefits and DWP.

- What other support services for carers they knew about, used or wanted to connect with.
- Suggestions for what changes they would like to see to Carer Support Payment and support services in future.

The event was supported by Happy to Translate, a local community partner who assisted with recruitment, translation services on the day, and logistics such as venue and catering.

Interpreters were present at each table to help with understanding, although some participants communicated in English. Where a quote used in this summary was from an interpreter, rather than directly from a participant, this has been noted.

Barriers

Low awareness

Many participants had a low awareness of benefits, services and eligibility for these. In most cases, this was attributed to having had little or no contact with the benefits system throughout their life.

Quote from participant:

"We don't know how to apply, how to get it. We don't know who qualifies and doesn't qualify."

However, one participant who had applied for Carer's Allowance had been rejected as they were not viewed as the primary carer for their mother.

Quote from participant:

"To phone up and find out you're not the primary carer at all. That takes you…it knocks you for sixes, you don't know what to say. You're looking after your mother for so long, and then to be told, all of a sudden, you're not the primary carer at all. What do you do?"

Many participants expressed confusion around eligibility for benefits. This was commonly related to whether having savings in the bank would affect their eligibility for benefits. Some stated that they had not applied for Carer's Allowance because they believed that their savings account would be checked and their application refused.

Some participants did not understand how support for carers interacted with other benefits, and worried that receiving Carer Support Payment or Carer's Allowance would reduce or stop other benefits.

Others were confused about whether receiving a pension would affect their eligibility for the payment.

Many participants had limited knowledge of where or how to find help for getting access to benefits.

Similarly, many were not aware of services that are available to request interpreters or information in their first language.

There was also some evidence that participants had low awareness of additional aspects of support for carers, such as respite, and how it works.

Cultural and social barriers

Participants from all language groups expressed some confusion as to what was meant by the term 'carer'. Many who cared for family members said that they did not think the term applied to what they did.

Many participants expressed surprise that caring for a family member was something that you would receive a benefit for, as caring was seen as a duty.

Quote from participant:

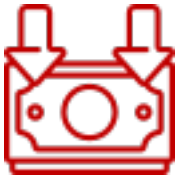
"As a Chinese carer, they think it's their duty. No matter what. Changing their belief – that's the most difficult part."

Some male participants stated that they should be self-sufficient as that's the way they have always been. Some female participants stressed that they wanted to be financially independent, and not seen as a burden on their husband or family through costing money for care needs.

Quote from participant:

"In our community, we tend to keep close to ourselves, and that's the way we've always been. […] In our families, we've always been, kind of been self-sufficient, and that's the way we've always been. We've been brought up like that."

Some participants placed a high value on being in work and having “good jobs”. They stressed that they felt people should not have to give up work to provide care. A few commented that others in the family should step into the caring role to allow someone to continue working.



However, some female participants said that, having spent most of their life in unpaid caring roles, they were concerned about low income and having to rely on the savings of their husband or other family members. They commented that they hadn’t paid into a pension and therefore had very limited independent income.

Very few participants had used local carer centres or carer support plans. Some attributed this to these services not feeling as if they were part of their community.

Language and communication barriers

Participants from all groups stated that communication could be difficult due to language barriers. In some cases, this was compounded by cultural differences in the meaning of certain terms, such as ‘carer,’ or difficulty understanding technical terms such as ‘non-means tested’.

For example, Cantonese-language participants mentioned that carer could be defined in two different ways, denoting a paid or unpaid carer. They highlighted that there is often a need for double-translation for some terms: a literal translation from English to Cantonese, and then to an alternative Cantonese term that is more appropriate for the context.

Some older participants mentioned that difficulties with language were compounded by age, reducing their confidence and making it harder for them to seek out or use support independently.

Quote from participant:

"As you get older, the confidence isn't there."

Some participants said that they felt discriminated against because they had English as a second language. They felt that social security staff they had spoken to did not make enough effort to help them understand and guide them through the application process. They wanted to see more empathy from staff in understanding language difficulties.

Quote from participant:

"There is some prejudice or some attitude in there. I really believe that's the attitude they're holding. When you're not speaking English or [you're] from an ethnic minority [background] they make it harder. […] It's easy to just follow the process. It's easier for them to reject people than stay on the call and give people as much information as they can. […] Yes, you need to be professional but at the end of the day you need to be a human being as well."

Some participants said that they would prefer face-to-face communication where possible. This was because it allowed them to use other cues to aid understanding, such as body language, or taking more time to make sure they are understood.

Quote from participant:

"If you speak to somebody face-to-face you can take your time, and you can try to explain better and the person can understand you."

Some participants thought that using the phone was a good way of communicating. However, others mentioned that phone lines could often be unclear, making it harder to understand someone who was speaking in English.

Some participants said that interpreters were useful during phone calls in the right situation. However, a few Punjabi language participants mentioned that interpreters could often use a different regional dialect, or have an accent that made it hard to understand them over the phone.

Many participants felt that digital communication – for example, through a website or online chat – was inaccessible for older people. Some mentioned that it was hard to find information online.

Quote from interpreter:

"The major barriers are language and digital. Most are elderly carers and they don't know how to use the computer in order to access the information."

Trust emerged as an important factor in whether or not someone would make contact with Social Security Scotland. Participants mentioned a fear of online or telephone scams, and described this a reason that they would not use contact telephone numbers or online services.

A few participants stated that it was helpful to have information in a paper format so that they had a 'hard-copy' which they could refer back to, and take their time understanding. A few wanted a translation in their own language, whereas others were comfortable for this to be in English.

What support was used?

Many participants described using family and friends for help with care needs, and highlighted that people within their community care for each other.

Quote from participant:

"Now, see if I need any extra care, right, see where I stay? I just knock on the window and they'll come across. [laughter] It's my brother that stays across the road from me."

This support often included a reliance on their children when participants did interact with social security or other organisations. For example, help with translating material, handling paperwork and making or answering phone calls.

However, many participants noted that friends and family are not always available for support. For example, children may not be able or have time to help as much as is needed. A few described this as contributing to loneliness and isolation for older people.

Quote from interpreter:

“The children are working, and the families are working and they can’t spare time to take [their parents] to the [day care] centre, or take them back or whatever. So, for that reason, some people are not able to come out, they just stay in the house.”

Many Punjabi-, Urdu- and Hindi-speaking participants attended a local day-care centre for community support. Similarly, Cantonese-speaking participants attended a local lunch-club.

These community centres were described as useful because they helped to alleviate loneliness, were good sources of information, and did not have any language barriers to participation.

Quote from interpreter:

“These centres are beneficial for them because of the language. Everybody is from an ethnic minority and they speak the language, they know the activities there are always in their own language, so that’s more beneficial for them.”

However, these centres were described as underfunded and lacking resources. For example, the centre used by Punjabi-, Urdu- and Hindi-speaking participants could not afford to run transport for people, meaning that some in the community were unable to attend.

Some participants mentioned getting support from Citizens Advice. A few described this as being complicated and hard to fit in around caring responsibilities.

Quote from participant:

"Citizens Advice will fill out forms for you, not a problem. But you've to go and stand in a queue - they don't give an appointment. You've got to be there at half past eight in the morning for a three o'clock turn. And who's going to look after the [cared for person] while you stand in the queue for six hours?"

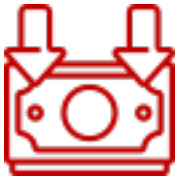
A few participants mentioned feeling that they were left without support. One commented that she felt she was struggling emotionally with being a carer.

Quote from participant:

"I'm not ashamed, I need emotional support – even someone to come out and stay with us for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, an hour – 'How are you getting on?' – that speaks volumes."

What changes did participants want?

Payment value



Some participants commented that they thought the payment rate was too low for someone who was caring full-time and had no other income. A few suggested that the payment should equal at least the minimum wage.

Quote from participant:

"The government needs to treat them as a worker."

Language or culture

Some participants wanted to see more translated materials. For example, translated copies of any additional information that is sent with application decision letters or other communications from Social Security Scotland.

Some participants suggested ‘language-testing’ focus groups, to test understanding of terms across different communities. Some also wanted additional explanations for any terms or words that may be unfamiliar.

Others wanted to see more people from their communities represented within the workforce of Social Security Scotland. They felt that this would encourage a cultural change within the agency which would improve interactions with people from ethnic minority communities.

One Cantonese-language participant suggested that there needs to be better training for bilingual support workers, as they do not currently have the in-depth knowledge of the benefits system that is needed to help people.

Outreach and information

Many participants stated that Social Security Scotland needs to do more outreach activities within their communities to raise awareness of the benefits and support that are available to people.

Quote from participant:

"[Social Security Scotland] say social security is a human right – they should be doing more to reach out to ethnic minorities."

Participants wanted to see more information in their first language provided at public buildings such as libraries, medical services (GPs, dentists etc.), care homes, and religious centres. Some suggested that connecting with the day-care centres or lunch club that they attended would be a good way for Social Security Scotland to do this.

Participants wanted more in-person support to help people understand the benefits system. For example, information sessions delivered by Social Security Scotland staff at public locations. A few stated that it would be helpful to have support with applications and paperwork available at these sessions.

Some emphasised that this in person support needs to be bilingual and to have 'cultural competence' to understand the beliefs and attitudes of the community.

A few participants suggested that finding ways of speaking to younger generations in the community may be useful in terms of raising awareness of the support available to carers.

Some participants stated that they found the number of different organisations that they had to deal with confusing. They said that they found it difficult to find information themselves and would like to have a 'one-stop shop' where they could find collated information on benefits and other available support.

Quote from participant:

“Because, at the end of the day, nobody knows anything about it until somebody tells you something about it, and the information is not easily collated in any way.”

What’s next?

The findings in this report will be used by teams working on designing and implementing the new Carer Support Payment and the Carer's Additional Person Payment.

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