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Social Security Experience Panels - Inclusive Communication



EQUALITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL SECURITY



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Introduction

In August 2019, the Scottish Government carried out a survey and focus groups with Experience Panel members to gather views on various aspects of communication.

This work was part of the Scottish Government's Social Security Experience Panels programme of research. In total, 438 Experience Panel members took part in the survey (a response rate of 20 per cent) and 39 members took part in nine focus groups across Scotland. The findings of this research reflects the views of the respondents and participants only. This report details the findings and key themes that emerged from this work.

Summary

Applying for a benefit

More than half of respondents (54 per cent) said they would apply themselves when applying for a benefit from Social Security Scotland. Four in ten (40 per cent) said they would apply themselves but with some help from someone else. Six per cent said they would get someone else to apply for them.

Over half of respondents (53 per cent) said they would prefer to apply through an online method such as a computer, tablet or mobile phone. One quarter (26 per cent) of respondents selected post using a paper form. 14 per cent said they would prefer to apply in person, whether through a home visit or Social Security Scotland location. Telephone was the least popular method for applying, with only six per cent of respondents.

Of those respondents who said they would prefer to apply online using a computer, mobile phone or tablet, the most common reason given was that that they felt it was easier, quicker and more convenient. Other reasons included:

- Having access to and being comfortable using technology to apply online.
- They can use assistive technology online.
- Applicants can apply at a time and place of their choosing.
- Applicants can apply at their own pace and reflect on their answers.
- Online forms are easier to edit and correct.
- Online forms are less likely to get lost.
- Online forms do not involve travel.

Of those respondents who selected post using a paper form, the most common reason given was that it allowed them to take their time with the application. This included taking breaks, having time to reflect on their answers to provide the necessary information and checking it for accuracy. Other reasons included:

- Paper forms can be copied and retained for personal records.
- Not having access to or being comfortable using technology to apply online.
- Paper forms feeling more reliable and secure than other methods.
- Paper forms can be more easily used to get help from others.

Of those respondents who selected in person through a home visit or at a Social Security Scotland location as their preferred application method, the most common reason given was that they have limited mobility. Other respondents said that they would prefer to apply face to face more generally. Respondents felt that staff would be knowledgeable, able to explain the form, answer any questions and see first hand the applicant's circumstances. A few respondents said they would feel more at ease and less stressed applying in their own home.

Of those respondents who selected telephone, the most common reason given was that they prefer speaking to someone. This included preferring verbal communication more generally and wanting to speak to Social Security Scotland staff who are trained and knowledgeable of the system. Some respondents felt that applying over the phone also makes the process easier, and potentially quicker, particularly when resolving queries and issues.

Around two thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said their disability influences how they would prefer to apply.

Of respondents who chose a non-digital method of applying, nearly half (48 per cent) said they don't feel comfortable submitting personal data online, whilst over four in ten (42 per cent) said that applying online feels impersonal. Around one third (34 per cent) said that the help they need from someone else because of their disability puts them off from applying online and three in ten (30 per cent) said that they don't feel confident using computers.

Communication preferences

We asked focus group participants to tell us what they like and dislike about the different ways they might communicate with Social Security Scotland more generally. Overall, participant communication preferences were influenced by an individual's disability or health condition, level of comfort using and access to the internet and technological devices, and the purpose of the communication.

Letter

In common with survey respondents, focus group participants liked that letters create a paper trail, allow time to think and process information, and do not require technology. In terms of dislikes, participants raised the slow speed and cost of letters, alongside the possibility of postal items going missing. Other dislikes included environmental concerns about the use of paper, or situations where a person's disability or health condition makes written communication difficult.

Telephone

Participants said that speaking to someone on the phone can feel more personal than other communication methods, and that an empathetic or knowledgeable operator can provide a positive experience. Like survey respondents, some participants felt that the phone is useful for quick queries. In terms of dislikes, participants said that communicating by phone can be difficult because multiple choice menu options can be confusing and it can be difficult getting through to the relevant person. Other dislikes included language barriers, not having time to think, forgetting or not understanding the discussion, no record being available, and concerns about security.

Email

In common with survey respondents, focus group participants liked that emails are quick and convenient. In terms of dislikes, participants highlighted problems with not having access to or being comfortable using the internet and technology. Participants also raised concerns about online security or the technology needed not always being reliable.

Web chat

Participants said they liked that web chat is quicker, easier and 'more direct' than using the phone or email. They felt it is often available when other communication methods are not, and liked that it can be used without having to leave home. Others liked that you could save a record of the conversation. In terms of dislikes, participants raised similar issues to those above about access and use of technology. Participants also said they dislike that you cannot physically see who you are chatting to and it can feel impersonal.

Skype or video call

Participants said they liked the face to face aspect of skype or video call communications. Like web chat, participants said that skype was convenient and liked that they could use it without leaving their home. In terms of dislikes, some participants felt that skype or video call is 'intrusive' or an invasion of privacy. Like email and web chat, participants also raised concerns about access and use of technology, and around the security of their personal information.

Getting help with a benefit application

Over eight in ten respondents (83 per cent) said that they had needed help with a benefit application in the past.

Just under eight in ten respondents (78 per cent) said they needed help knowing what to write on the application form, and over half (52 per cent) said they needed help understanding the application form. Half of respondents (50 per cent) said they

needed help because their disability or health condition makes filling in forms difficult for them. Around four in ten (39 per cent) said they needed emotional support when doing the application.

Over half of respondents said a support organization such as Citizens Advice Bureau or Welfare Rights helped them with an application form. Around one third (34 per cent) said they were helped by a friend or family member.

Overall, nine in ten respondents (90 per cent) said the support they received with the application was helpful or very helpful, with two thirds (66 per cent) saying it was 'very helpful'. Seven per cent rated the support as 'not so helpful' or 'not at all helpful.'

Respondents had various experiences of receiving help, on different occasions, and from various people and organisations. This help gave respondents reassurance that their application form was completed as accurately as possible, and for some allowed them to recognise the impact of their health condition or disability on their daily lives. Some respondents said that the emotional support provided was essential, and that receiving help relieved some of the feelings of stress and anxiety which accompanied the application process.

Over one third (36 per cent) of respondents said they hadn't always been able to get help with a benefit application form when they needed it.

The most common reason for this was availability of support. Many respondents explained that the support organisations they contacted for help were often very busy. This meant it was difficult to get an appointment in the time period required to submit their application. Other challenges included difficulty travelling, particularly in small towns and rural areas and outwith particular hours. Some referred to support organisation venues not being accessible. Some respondents said they did not know that they could ask for help or did not know where it was available.

Online information videos

We asked respondents their thoughts on Social Security Scotland providing information about benefits in video format. These videos will be audio described for people with visual impairments. There will be alternative videos with British Sign language translation, including captioning, for people with hearing impairments.

Overall, just under six in ten respondents (58 per cent) thought that the idea of information about Social Security Scotland in video format would be helpful. 14 per cent did not think this would be helpful. Just under three in ten (28 per cent) respondents said it would be neither helpful nor unhelpful.

The most common reasons for saying the videos would be helpful was that information delivered this way was felt to be easy to understand and remember, or that they respond well to visual or oral information. Other reasons included:

- Videos feeling more ‘personal’ and ‘humane’ than written text, which would put applicants and clients at ease when applying and claiming.
- Videos being less strenuous on their physical and mental health than written text.
- Videos being beneficial for people with particular disabilities and health conditions.
- Being able to watch and re-watch online information videos at any time or place.

Of respondents who said that online information videos would not be helpful, some said that they simply preferred written communication or that it was more suitable to them due to their disability or health condition. Other reasons included:

- Not having the technology to access the videos online, or feeling that the technology needed could be unreliable.
- Online information videos having the potential to be ‘patronising’ and ‘impersonal’.
- It may be difficult to locate relevant information in online information videos and it is a one-way form of communication.

Most respondents said they would find it useful to have videos explaining:

- Each benefit e.g. eligibility criteria.
- How a face to face assessment will work.
- How to apply.
- How Social Security Scotland will make a decision on applications.
- The redetermination and appeals process.
- How to notify Social Security Scotland about a change of circumstances.

Background and research methods

The Scottish Government is becoming responsible for some of the benefits currently delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

As part of the work to prepare for this change, the Scottish Government set up the Social Security Experience Panels. Over 2,400 people from across Scotland who have recent experience of at least one of the benefits coming to Scotland registered as Experience Panel members during the launch in 2017. The Scottish Government is working with Experience Panel members to design a new social security system that works for the people of Scotland, based on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect.

In this research project, we used a survey and focus groups to ask Experience Panel members their experiences and views on various aspects of communication, such as:

- Applying for a benefit

- General communication preferences
- Getting help with a benefit application
- Online information videos

Respondents were recruited from the Scottish Government Experience Panels. All Experience Panel members were invited to take part in the survey. The Social Security Experience Panels are a longitudinal research project. The panels are made up of volunteers from the Scottish population who have relevant experience. The results of this work should be regarded as being reflective of the experience and views of the participants only, and are not indicative of the views of a wider Scottish population. Percentages are given only to show a broad sense of the balance of opinion across participants.

Participation in Experience Panels research is optional, and in this case 438 people chose to complete the survey (a response rate of 20 per cent). 39 panel members took part in nine focus groups across Scotland.¹

Survey method

Information from the survey was added to information from the ‘*About Your Benefits and You*² and ‘*Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*³ surveys. The demographic data collected in these surveys was linked to the information supplied by respondents of this survey as part of the longitudinal data set for the wider Experience Panels project. This data was only available for around half of survey respondents. This is because demographic information for newly registered Experience Panel members was not yet available at the time of writing. The following demographic information is given to provide context to the findings from the survey.

Over one third of respondents who we have demographic information for identified as ‘man or boy’ (37 per cent) and just under two thirds (63 per cent) identified as ‘woman or girl’.

Table 1: Gender of survey respondents (n=246)

Gender	%
Woman or girl	63
Man or boy	37
Total	100

¹ Dundee, Glasgow x 2, Irvine, Greenock, Dumfries, Edinburgh, Hamilton, Lanark

² Scottish Government (2017). *Social Security Experience Panels: About Your Benefits and You – Quantitative Research Findings*. [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/11/7769/

³ Scottish Government (2018). *Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far*. [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083/

Just under half of respondents were aged 45 to 59 (47 per cent) and over one third were aged 60 to 79 (38 per cent). 15 per cent of respondents were aged between 25 and 44.

Table 2: Age of survey respondents (n=248)

Age	%
Under 25	0
25 – 44	15
45 – 59	47
60 – 79	38
80 or over	0
Total	100

Almost nine in ten respondents (87 per cent) had a disability or long term health condition.

Table 3: Disability status of respondents (n=251)

Disability status	
Disabled	87
Not disabled	13

Just under two thirds of respondents had a physical disability (63 per cent) and around six in ten had chronic pain (62 per cent). One fifth had a mental health condition (20 per cent) and around one in ten had a severe hearing impairment (13 per cent). Under one in ten had a severe visual impairment (eight per cent) or a learning disability (eight per cent). Just under six in ten told us they had some other kind of disability or long term health condition (59 per cent).

Table 4: Disability types of respondents (n=251)⁴

Disability Types	%
Has a physical disability	63
Has chronic pain	62
Has a mental health condition	20
Has a severe hearing impairment	13

⁴ The percentage is of total respondents, not disabled respondents. Respondents were able to select multiple disability types.

Has a severe visual impairment	8
Has a learning disability	8
Has another kind of disability or long term health condition	59

Around half of respondents (49 per cent) said they were a carer.

Table 5: Caring status of respondents (n=247)

Caring status	%
Carer	49
Not a carer	50
Prefer not to say	1
Total	100

Of respondents who said they were a carer, 78 per cent cared for an adult friend or relative. Over one third were a carer due to old age (36 per cent). Around two in ten cared for a disabled child (22 per cent).

Table 6: Who do respondents care for? (n=120)

Care status	%
Cares for an adult	78
Cares for a child	22
Carer due to old age	36

Survey respondents took part from 31 of 32 local authority areas in Scotland. The majority lived in an urban area (83 per cent).⁵

Table 7: Location of respondents (n=284)

Location	%
Urban	83
Rural	17
Total	100

⁵ 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

Survey respondents who took part had experience of claiming or helping someone else to claim a wide range of benefits. The most common benefits claimed by survey respondents were Personal Independence Payment (69 per cent) and Disability Living Allowance (71 per cent). The least common benefits claimed were for Funeral Expenses (10 per cent), Sure Start Maternity Grant (seven per cent) and Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit (six per cent).

Table 8: Respondents benefit experience (n=252)⁶

Benefit	%
Personal Independence Payment	69
Disability Living Allowance	71
Carer's Allowance	44
Cold Weather Payment	35
Winter Fuel Payment	37
Discretionary Housing Payment	25
Scottish Welfare Fund	19
Attendance Allowance	25
Universal Credit	19
Severe Disablement Allowance	19
Funeral Expenses	10
Sure Start Maternity Grant	7
Industrial Injuries Disability Benefit	6

More detailed demographic information on the Experience Panels as a whole can be found in *'Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far.'*⁷

Applying for a benefit

In the past, Experience Panel members have told us that having different ways to communicate with Social Security Scotland is key to ensuring accessibility. In this project, we asked panel members a series of questions related to inclusive communication.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Scottish Government (2018). *Social Security Experience Panels: Who is in the panels and their experiences so far.* [Online] Available at: www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/10/3083

Method of applying

We asked respondents how they would be most likely to apply for a benefit from Social Security Scotland. More than half of respondents said they would apply themselves (54 per cent), whilst four in ten (40 per cent) said they would apply themselves but with some help from someone else. Six per cent said they would get someone else to apply for them.

Table 9: If you were applying for a benefit from Social Security Scotland for yourself or someone you care for, how are you most likely to apply? (n=438)

	%
Apply myself	54
Apply myself but with some help from someone else	40
Get someone else to apply for me	6
Total	100

We then asked respondents which method they would prefer to apply through. Just under four in ten respondents (39 per cent) said they would prefer to apply online using a computer, whilst one quarter (26 per cent) selected post using a paper form. All other options were selected by than fewer than one in ten respondents.

Table 10: Which method would you prefer to apply through? (n=435)

	%
Online using a computer	39
Post using a paper form	26
Online using a tablet	8
In person through a home visit	8
Online using a mobile phone	6
In person at an agency location	6
Telephone	6
Another way	2
Total	101 ⁸

⁸ Results are presented as whole numbers for ease of reading. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to exactly 100 per cent.

Overall, over half of respondents (53 per cent) said they would prefer to apply through an online method such as a computer, tablet or mobile phone. 14 per cent said they would prefer to apply in person, whether through a home visit or at a Social Security Scotland location. Telephone was the least popular method for applying.

We asked respondents why they would like to apply through their preferred method.

Online using a computer

Of those respondents who said they would prefer to apply online using a computer, the most common response was that they felt it was easier and more convenient. Many of these respondents described this method as 'quicker', in terms of completing the form, editing the form, and sending it off for processing.

"It is fast, convenient and flexible as it can be done at home."

"Will be received quicker than posting a form. Hopefully will be dealt with quicker."

Some respondents also felt that applying online reduced the risk of an application going missing, and provided a more secure means of dating when an application was sent. Other respondents said that online was an easier way for them to apply because they are comfortable and familiar with using technology and online applications.

"Applying online you get a received reply from the recipient letting you know they have your message and will be in touch soon. Cuts out postage and possible loss or mishandling of documentation and also saves time and money for everyone."

Many respondents said that applying online using a computer is more accessible for them due to their disability or health condition including for example, issues with mobility.

"I can't always go out or talk to people I don't know."

"I have mobility problems and this is why I would prefer to do this online. I have difficulty getting to a post office to post forms etc."

Some of these respondents explained that they are able to adjust their computer settings to suit their needs, or that they use assistive technology.

"I am visually impaired and need assistive technology to access day to day information if it is available electronically."

Some respondents who said they would prefer to apply online said this is because they could take their time with the application, have breaks and reflect on their answers. These respondents emphasised the importance of being able to save and return to the application over time. Some respondents also explained that applying online using a computer would also allow them to more easily edit the application form.

“Flexibility time-wise and the ability to stop/start/edit as I see fit until it's done.”

Post using a paper form

For respondents who preferred post using a paper form, the most common reason given was that it allowed them to take their time with the application. This included taking breaks, having time to reflect on their answers to provide the necessary information and checking it for accuracy.

“I want time to look at the questions, sometimes going through these in a different order than list. With fatigue I need to be able to pick it up and put it down in my own pace and time, and not feel pressured as other forms make me, i.e. on line in any form, or to feel pressured to verbally answer to someone over the phone. This is too exhausting and could lead to me not giving a full answer or relevant information. I need time to think, which only happens with paper forms. I need time to review my answers and add in points that I invariably miss initially.”

Many respondents explained that applying through the post using a paper form allowed them to make a copy and retain it for their personal records. Many of these respondents described the paper form as creating a ‘paper trail’ and being ‘proof’ of their application.

“I would be able to copy the form and therefore retain a record.”

“Using post I can have a record of when I posted and what it said.”

Some respondents said they do not have access to or are not comfortable using technology to apply online.

“I would have said online but I am getting my internet disconnected soon. I also think there are a lot of people who are not IT literate and this could be a major issue for many if it were to be done online. Also many may not be able to afford to be online or have the data to fill in a form via their mobile phone.”

“It does not rely on an internet connection.”

In addition, for a few respondents, applying through the post using a paper form felt more reliable and secure than applying online. These respondents expressed concerns about online applications being 'lost' or highlighted issues with online security.

"Because through experience online applications are sometimes not received or stopped before you are finished."

"With so many online scams and data being illegally accessed if an application arrives by post you know it to be genuine."

Finally, a few respondents said that their disability or health condition meant applying through the post using a paper form was their preferred option. This was the case for a wide range of different disabilities. For example, for the following respondents, their sensory impairment means that a paper form is the easiest and most comfortable way of applying.

"Because of my sensory and word processing issues I often find using screens difficult and tiring. A paper form means I can take as much time as I need and get help from someone."

"I am partially sighted. Using electronic devices present me with a number of difficulties - brightness or dimness of the screen etc. Using paper forms allows me to adjust the position of the form or the lighting to suit my requirements."

Other respondents described how their physical disability, chronic pain and/or a mental health condition means a paper form is best suited to their needs because it allows them to complete the application when they feel able to, in the comfort of their own home.

"If it is a paper form I can pick it up and put it down as and when pain/discomfort dictates. I can go back to it time and time again over a period of days without having to remember log in details or answer security questions."

"I have severe social phobia and can't go out to use equipment at a library, I also can't phone because I have difficulty speaking, and I do not have a posh mobile phone with internet. I am also physically disabled and have to do things when I am not in severe pain, so paper allows me to do a bit at a time."

As indicated throughout the excerpts above, some respondents said that applying through the post using a paper form would allow them to more easily get help from others with filling it in.

In person through a home visit

Of those respondents who selected in person through a home visit as their preferred application method, the most common response was that they have limited mobility.

“Difficulty in leaving house due to disability and writing is illegible therefore a home visit from a member of staff would be easier for me.”

Other respondents said that they would prefer to apply face to face for a range of reasons. These respondents felt that staff would be knowledgeable, able to explain the form, answer any questions and see firsthand their circumstances.

“I would prefer a house visit, because they would be able to come to the house see my circumstances face on and also make recommendations as to what to say in my application and help me do parts which I would find difficult like the reading and writing parts. Also if I had any issues I can raise it to them and they could be able to assist.”

Others said that they found it challenging to explain their circumstances in writing and preferred face to face communication. Finally, a few respondents said they would feel more at ease and less stressed applying in their own home.

“I prefer speaking to people, I sometimes struggle to write on forms with what I mean whereas I can communicate it better.”

“The forms can be confusing and trying to get help via the phone is a nightmare. Being able to apply with someone sitting there with you would help to lessen some of the stress.”

In person at a Social Security Scotland location

Respondents who said they would prefer to apply in person at a Social Security Scotland location or venue highlighted similar reasons to those who said they would apply in person through a home visit. This included preferring face to face communication as the best way to explain their circumstances. Some of these respondents similarly felt that staff would answer any of their questions and help fill in the form, making the application more accurate and the process less stressful.

“Because it's very difficult to explain in writing the challenges of living with a long-term health condition. I'd rather explore it in person and be able to explain it better.”

“I would prefer to see someone to check over my form and ensure I am completing it correctly and also to ask questions if I am stuck with parts of the form.”

Telephone

Among respondents who selected telephone as their preferred application method, the most common reason given was that they prefer speaking to someone. This included preferring verbal communication more generally and having the opportunity to speak to Social Security Scotland staff who are trained and knowledgeable of the system. Some respondents felt that applying over the phone also makes the process easier, and potentially quicker, particularly for resolving queries.

“It is being able to speak to a person and not having to worry if it has been completed correctly.”

A few respondents said that their disability or health condition meant it is not possible to apply through other methods.

“Being visually impaired I find form filling almost impossible.”

Online using a mobile phone or using a tablet

Respondents who said they would prefer to apply online using a mobile or tablet raised similar reasons to those who would prefer to apply online using a computer.

“I always have my phone on me and this way I can complete application anywhere.”

“Quick. Can take screen shots to show I have completed it.”

“No travelling costs involved and portable.”

Accessibility of applying

Around two thirds of respondents (67 per cent) said their disability influences how they would prefer to apply.

Table 12: Do your disability or accessibility requirements influence how you would prefer to apply? (n=433)

	%
Yes	67
No	33
Total	100

Respondents selected which accessibility adjustments would help them to apply. Over six in ten respondents selected Easy Read⁹ (62 per cent), and one quarter selected large print (25 per cent). Just under one fifth said applications compatible with assisted technology would help them to apply (19 per cent).

Table 13: Which of the following accessibility requirements would help you to apply? (n=248)

	%
Easy Read	62
Large print	25
Something else	24
Suitable for use with assisted technology software	19
Information in a different format (e.g. different colour font or paper)	9
Hearing Loop	6
Typetalk/text messaging	5
Electronic Notetaker or Palantypist	4
Braille	2
Deafblind guide communicator	2
BSL/English interpreter	1
Information in another language	1

Of those respondents who selected ‘something else’, some said face to face support or someone to physically fill in the application form on their behalf would help them to apply. Some felt that a longer time period to complete the application would help them, as would shorter, plain English forms.

Reasons for not using online methods

We presented respondents who choose a non-digital method of applying with some additional questions. We asked what, if anything, put them off from applying online. Nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) said they don’t feel comfortable submitting personal data online, whilst over four in ten (42 per cent) said that applying online feels impersonal. Around one third (34 per cent) said they need help from someone

⁹ Easy Read is an accessible format of providing information designed for people with a learning disability. The Easy Read format is easy to understand because it uses simple, jargon free language, shorter sentences and supporting images. The survey did not provide a definition of Easy Read format.

else because of their disability and three in ten (30 percent) said that they don't feel confident using computers.

Table 14: Do any of the following put you off from applying online? (n=190)

	%
I don't feel comfortable submitting personal data online	48
Applying online feels impersonal	42
I require help from someone else because of my disability	34
I don't feel confident using computers	30
Another reason	22
I don't have good broadband signal	14
I don't have enough mobile data	13
I don't have good mobile signal	13
My nearest internet location (e.g. library) is too far away	13
I can't afford to use internet at home	12
I require information in another format (e.g. easy read)	9
I require additional assisted technology	6
I require information in another language	0

Of those respondents who said 'another reason' put them off applying online, some expressed concern that an online application would require them to complete it in one sitting or that they would not be able to retain a copy of the application for their records.

"I want extra time and not to have to apply all in one sitting."

"I can't keep a copy of what I've submitted. That means I worry about it being lost or if it is referred to I can't always remember what I said."

Some respondents said that they feared the technology might fail which would result in their application progress being lost.

"Something going wrong so info is lost while completing."

A few respondents highlighted that limited library hours and access to public computers put them off applying online, whilst other raised concerns about the security of their personal data.

“I can only use library computers for one hour at a time. Sometimes I can't remember my library number and pin code.”

Supporting use of online communication

We asked respondents who indicated a barrier to personal online access where they would like to go to apply online.¹⁰ Four in ten respondents (40 per cent) said they would prefer a Social Security Scotland worker coming to their home, whilst just over two in ten (22 per cent) said the library or a Social Security Scotland building.¹¹

Table 15: If you don't have online access, where would you like to go to apply online? (n=60)

	%
Library	22
Social Security Scotland building	22
Social Security Scotland worker coming to your home	40
Other	40

Respondents who selected 'other' said they would go to a friend or family member, or Citizens Advice Bureau to apply online. Some simply said that they did not want to apply online.

Finally, we asked those respondents if there is anything that Social Security Scotland could do to make it easier for them to engage online, for example, find information or apply for a benefit. Some respondents said that ensuring online information and processes are functional would help them. Suggestions included an online system in which to check the progress of an application, a document upload service for supporting information, and sent and received email notifications.

“For them to provide an email address that I can confidently use and to send an acknowledgement when my application is received.”

¹⁰ Respondents who selected the following options in Table 14: I don't have good broadband signal, I don't have enough mobile data, I don't have good mobile signal, My nearest internet location (e.g. library) is too far away, I can't afford to use internet at home

¹¹ The number of responses to this question were relatively small.

“If there was a proper app or website that you could have a reference number and login to check application was received and if it had been processed. Being able to check-up on the progress would take a lot of the pressure and stress of you applying.”

Other respondents said that ensuring online information and applications are compatible with assistive technology would help them.

“Make sure the online application is completely accessible including links, buttons and headings that work by being properly set up, accessible form fields and combo boxes and the facility to save a partly completed application and return to it later. It would not be enough simply to put the print form online and hope for the best.”

A few respondents said that that live online support such as web chat would help them to engage with Social Security Scotland online, however many said they would require face to face support. More generally, respondents said that use of simple language and formats, alongside sufficient information, would help them engage online.

“If you do have to have an online system, retain the ability to call and speak with people, or have live chats to answer questions and provide information.”

Communication preferences

As outlined above, we asked survey respondents about their communication preferences for making a benefit application. In the past, we have also asked panel members their preferences for a wide range of specific communications, for example, booking an appointment¹² or receiving the outcome of a benefit application.¹³ In this project, we also asked focus group participants to tell us what they like and dislike about the different ways they might communicate with Social Security Scotland more generally. This will be helpful context information for a range of design decisions.

Letter

Likes

Focus group participants raised similar likes and dislikes about paper or letter communication that survey respondents mentioned above. For example,

¹² Scottish Government (2019). Social Security Experience Panels: Appointments and Local Delivery [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-social-security-scotland-appointments-local-delivery/>

¹³ Scottish Government (2020). Social Security Experience Panels: Decision making and reviewing an award [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-experience-panels-decision-making-reviewing-award-main-report/>

participants said they liked having a physical document, which can be stored and referred back to. This allows them to take their time processing information or take it to someone for assistance and support.

“I like having something physical. It’s a piece of validation and hard proof that I can use to challenge something if necessary.”

“You can take your time and read it through. There’s no chance of picking up the wrong information and it’s there in paper so you can refer back to it. It means you have something to take to someone else if you don’t understand something.”

Other participants said they liked letters because they do not require access to technology. For some this feels more reliable, whilst others had concerns about the different levels of IT literacy and connectivity across society.

“It’s reliable, dependable, you don’t lose it if the computer crashes. Anything that actually matters comes through the letterbox in the form of a piece of paper, it is not an email.”

“Paper still needs to be there...I think there are certain generational gaps. There are certain communities that are completely forgotten about that aren’t taken into account when pushing this digital future.”

Dislikes

In terms of dislikes, participants raised the slow speed and cost of letters, alongside the possibility of postal items going missing.

“It’s not readily accessible – it’s slower than communicating via phone or email.”

“Items go missing and people can claim they haven’t got things.”

Other dislikes included environmental concerns about the use of paper, or situations where a person’s disability or health condition makes written communication difficult.

“We’re all told not to use paper and save the planet.”

“Some people don’t have very good reading skills and just can’t manage to read all the information, especially when there’s jargon.”

Telephone

Likes

Participants said that speaking to someone on the phone feels more personal than other communication methods, and that an empathetic or knowledgeable operator can provide a positive experience. They like having the option to have a two-way discussion and ask questions.

“There’s a personal touch, you’re speaking to a real person.”

“Too many people I speak to don’t understand the system so in written communications they can get a bit confused. On the phone you can ask for clarification and ask questions if you don’t understand anything.”

Like survey respondents, some participants felt that the phone is useful for quick queries.

“I like the phone and there are days when I can’t walk. So in that respect an email, text message or letter won’t get there in time so in that respect it’s good.”

Dislikes

Participants had noticeably more to say about phone communication in terms of dislikes. Participants said that communicating by phone can be difficult because multiple choice menu options can be confusing and sometimes do not include what they are looking to discuss. This can make it difficult to know who to speak to or to get through to the relevant person. It can mean being kept on hold for a long period or being required to explain their situation more than once to different operators.

“You can be sitting on the line for a long time and not speak to anyone.”

“Half the time you don’t get to the person who knows what you’re talking about – you then have to explain yourself over and over and your situation over and over.”

Participants also said that the operator may not provide them with a positive experience, or that they sometimes find it difficult to interpret accents or face language barriers on the phone.

“If you get someone who has had a bad day, it can come across as aggression or hesitant.”

Other participants said that a main disadvantage of communicating by phone is that there is often little time to reflect, and it is possible to forget or not understand the discussion.

“You might forget what was said or might not be able to process all the information unless you try and write it down.”

“You don’t have time to think and consider things”

Related to this, participants said they disliked that there is no record of the discussion available for them after communicating by phone. Other dislikes included concerns about security and phone scams, and the cost of communicating by phone if a free phone number is not provided.¹⁴

Email

Likes

Focus group participants raised similar likes and dislikes about email communication that survey respondents mentioned above about applying online for a benefit. Participants said email communication was quick, convenient and that they found sent and received notifications particularly useful. They also like that emails can be saved and stored digitally.

“If you get too many letters then you have the physical aspect of that. But you can save emails into a file and they don’t get lost.”

“Unlike post, as soon as you send it you have a timestamp. There’s no way that someone can argue that they didn’t receive it.”

Similarly, participants liked that they can communicate where and when they choose, take their time, and edit any communication easily.

“You can do it in your own time, and you can take your time over it. You get a record, you can print it, and if you make a mistake you can go back to it.”

Dislikes

In terms of dislikes, participants raised that not everyone has access to email or knows how to use it.

“People can’t afford internet or laptops or computers.”

“It isn’t feasible for people who don’t have computer skills.”

¹⁴ It is free to call Social Security Scotland.

Like survey respondents, participants also raised concerns about online security or the technology needed not always being reliable. Related to this, some participants said they disliked that emails can also go 'missing', or be easily missed by the recipient. Some participant felt that letters carry more importance.

"People treat a letter more importantly than an email. People might ignore it and not take it seriously."

Web chat

Likes

Participants said they liked that web chat is quicker, easier and 'more direct' than using the phone or email. They felt it is often available when other communication methods are not, for example, at the evening or weekend. Web chat can provide 'real time' help. Some participants said that web chat was beneficial for people with specific health conditions or disabilities and they liked that they did not have to leave their home.

"I like web chat because you can get an answer and speak to someone very quickly."

"I think web chat is brilliant, for people who can't get out of the house, who can't write or struggle."

Others liked that you could save a record of the conversation to refer to in the future.

"You can do screen captures and record the conversations."

"Web chat can be a good thing because you get a copy of the transcript that you can keep."

Dislikes

In terms of dislikes, participants raised similar issues about access and use of technology as raised with email. Participants also said they dislike that you cannot physically see who you are chatting to or be certain they have the right knowledge to answer the query. For some respondents, web chat can feel impersonal.

"You are running the risk of getting through to a generic person – you may get half a dozen people that specialise in something but web chat just goes in a circle of who's available."

"Can't see who you're talking to."

Skype or video call

Likes

Participants said they liked the face to face aspect of skype or video call communications because it allowed them to connect with the other person.

“I use skype because of my hearing. I can see body language, it helps me a lot.”

“You can tell a lot by someone’s facial expressions. It’s like telephone and a bit more.”

Like web chat, participants said that skype was convenient and liked that they could use it without leaving their home.

“You can save a lot of time and money by having a meeting on skype.”

Dislikes

In terms of dislikes, some participants felt that skype or video call is ‘intrusive’ or an invasion of privacy and they were not comfortable being on camera. Like email and web chat, participants also raised concerns about access and use of technology, and around the security of their personal information.

“I’m a private person. For me, I don’t need the whole world seeing what I’m doing at the other end of the phone. Some days I am not comfortable presenting myself to someone. It’s an invasion of privacy.”

“It’s too complicated. That’s why I like a web chat, I could get upset, don’t want people to see me, depends how I’m feeling.”

Overall, participant communication preferences were influenced by an individual’s disability or health condition, level of comfort using and access to the internet and technological devices, and the purpose of the communication.

Getting help with a benefit application

We asked respondents a series of questions about getting help with benefit application forms. Over eight in ten respondents (83 per cent) said that they had needed help with a benefit application in the past.

Table 16: In the past, have you or the person you care for ever needed help with a benefit application form? (n=438)

	%
Yes	83
No	17
Don't know	1
Total	101

Most respondents said they sought help with a Disability Living Allowance (57 per cent) or Personal Independence Payment application form (72 per cent). Three in ten respondents said they had received help with other benefits. Most said this was Employment Support Allowance.

Table 17: What type of benefit application form have you sought help with? (n=361)

	%
Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	57
Personal Independence Payment (PIP)	72
Severe Disablement Allowance	13
Attendance Allowance	12
Carer's Allowance	16
Sure Start Maternity Grant	1
Funeral Expense Payment	3
Best Start Grant (Social Security Scotland benefit)	1
Other benefits (please provide details)	29

Reason for help

We asked respondents why they needed help with an application form in the past. Just under eight in ten respondents (78 per cent) said they needed help knowing what to write on the application form, and over half (52 per cent) said they needed help understanding the application form. Half of respondents (50 per cent) said they needed help because their disability or health condition makes filling in forms difficult for them. Around four in ten (39 per cent) said they needed emotional support when doing the application. Those respondents who said they needed help for 'another reason' provided answers which fell within the response categories listed.

Table 18: Why was the help needed? (n=359)

	%
I needed help knowing what to write on the application form	78
I needed help understanding the application form	52
My disability or health condition makes filling in forms difficult for me	50
I needed emotional support	39
Another reason	13
I needed help using a computer	6
I needed information in another language (including BSL)	0

Who helped

We asked respondents who had helped them with the application form. Over half of respondents said a support organisation such as Citizens Advice Bureau or Welfare Rights helped them, whilst around one third (34 per cent) selected friend or family member.

Table 19: Who helped you with the application form? (n=358)

	%
Support organisation e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau or Welfare Rights	57
Friend or family member	34
Someone who supports you because of your disability or health condition (e.g. Support Worker or someone from a disability organisation)	27
Local Authority e.g. Social Work, Income Maximisation, Occupational Therapist	18
Advocate	13
Other	8
DWP employee	6

How helpful the support was

Overall, nine in ten respondents (90 per cent) said they support they received with the application was helpful or very helpful, with two thirds (66 per cent) saying it was 'very helpful'. Seven per cent rated the support as 'not so helpful' or 'not at all helpful.'

Table 20: Overall, how helpful was the support you received with the application form? (n=358)

	%
Very helpful	66
Helpful	24
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	3
Not so helpful	4
Not at all helpful	3
Total	100

We asked respondents about their experience of getting help with an application form. Respondents had diverse experiences of receiving help, on different occasions, and from various people and organisations. Most respondents said they needed help understanding the application form and that the support they received was positive.

“The advisor was able to explain the question, giving examples, this helped me realise what the question was actually asking and made it relevant (or not) to me so I could better formulate an answer.”

Having someone explain the application form went hand in hand with receiving help knowing what to write on the form and how to write it.

"The forms are currently vast unfriendly and off putting. It is a great help to receive guidance from people who have filled them out before and know the language and details to include. They take some of the fear away."

“I was advised what information was not necessary and after talking through a normal day the person helping me was able to identify information that I should've included.”

This help gave some respondents reassurance that their application form was completed as accurately as possible. For others, discussing the application form with another person also allowed them to acknowledge or recognise the impact of their health condition or disability on their daily lives and to include relevant information they might have overlooked.

“It was just getting the correct information and wording it all correctly. Also having someone pointing out things I was in denial about myself and having to admit I am unable to do things that I think I can do.”

“It was useful to speak to someone about the information needed on the application forms, sometimes I’d forget to mention things as it’s just part of my normal life, not thinking of the huge differences between my everyday life and those without disabled children.”

Finally, some respondents said that those who provided practical help with an application form also provided welcome emotional support, and relieved some of the feelings of stress and anxiety which they felt accompanied the application process.

“I find it really upsetting having to revisit painful places emotionally and these forms just seem to bring these hidden emotions to the surface. Another person who can help both emotionally and advising on what best to put to express myself in the best way possible is invaluable.”

“Relieved feelings of overwhelming fear, panic and isolation, and the inability to fill in application. I felt Advocate in particular (but also [local authority welfare rights] staff) were not judging me or saw me as inadequate because I needed help.”

Whilst most respondents described their experience of getting support with an application as helpful, some respondents had a less positive experience. They highlighted a number of reasons. One respondent said that they felt they were not listened to, whilst others felt the advice was not sufficient.

“Basically the lady who helped me to complete the form did not listen to my needs and what I was telling her. She put down what she thought and this led to me being turned down for PIP.”

“An advocate I used - I was hoping would help with understanding what was meant by certain questions - but they didn't explain them - just told me they could only write what I said, but that didn't help me understand the question.”

Whilst some respondents said that discussing the application form with another person allowed them to acknowledge the impact of their health condition or disability on their daily lives and that this was a useful exercise, some found it difficult or overwhelming to disclose personal details with someone unfamiliar to them.

“On one hand, it was great as they made me think about lots of issues that I didn’t think were relevant, but on the other it was an invasion of privacy.”

“It is difficult to speak about some personal parts of my illness with someone at CAB or similar whom I have not met before.”

Finally, a few respondents explained that their experience of getting help with an application form was mixed because the availability of help and the advice given was not consistent.

“The first time I asked for help it was there. This time there was no help and found it very difficult to fill in.”

Getting help

We asked respondents if they have always been able to get help with a benefit application form when they needed it. Over half of respondents (54 per cent) said yes, whilst over one third (36 per cent) said they hadn't always been able to get help with a benefit application form when they needed it.

Table 21: Have you always been able to get help with a benefit application form when you needed it? (n=437)

	%
Yes	54
No	36
Don't know	10
Total	100

We asked respondents to tell us more about why they have not always been able to get help with an application form. The most common reason given was availability of help. Many respondents explained that the support organisations they contacted for help were often very busy meaning it was difficult to get an appointment in the time period required to submit their application. Some respondents felt it was particularly difficult to get an appointment on time because such support organisations were 'overstretched'.

“The length of time it takes to get an appointment with welfare rights does not tie in with the short period of time that is given by the DWP to return the completed form.”

“There are so many people needing help that you can't always get an appointment to see these helpers, and due to cutbacks on funding for these. Support/Help companies can't take on more (much needed) staff.”

Long waiting times and short deadlines on application forms were also compounded by difficulty travelling, particularly in small towns and rural areas.

“Citizens Advice have to help so many people that the short deadline is past before they can give you an appointment. It's hard to keep appointments as they're often based far from where I live and I may not be well enough to travel.”

“Couldn't attend an appointment as nowhere close to me and no means to travel.”

The hours organisations are available was also raised as a barrier.

“The timescale of responding coupled with availability out with working hours as I work full time and support a member of my family.”

This was particularly problematic for respondents with mobility issues. Moreover, a few respondents described encountering problems with the accessibility of support organisation venues.

“I've not always been able to physically access a location where I can get help.”

“Lack of information on who can help. Accessibility problems with places that might help.”

As indicated in the excerpt above, some respondents said they have not always been able to get help with an application form because they did not know that they could ask for help or did not know where it was available.

“I didn't know I could get help.”

“I didn't know where to go or who to ask.”

Finding the right organisation to help was also raised as a barrier.

“Passed around, money support workers, welfare rights workers, citizen's advice workers, money advisory workers, advocacy workers, housing workers. Difficult to know the route to take.”

Many respondents referred to a combination of the above themes when describing why they have not always been able to get help with an application form when they needed it.

“Time, distance, not knowing who to ask, limited appointments available, mental health, physical health.”

“I’ve had CAB say they have no appointment available, they also no longer do home visits for safety. I’ve had my postcode rule out support from various sources and I’ve not always known which groups are available to ask in the first place.”

Online information videos

Finally, we asked respondents their thoughts on Social Security Scotland providing information about benefits in video format. These videos will be audio described for people with visual impairments. There will be alternative videos with British Sign language translation, including captioning, for people with hearing impairments.

Overall, just under six in ten respondents (58 per cent) thought that the idea of information about Social Security Scotland in video format would be helpful. 14 per cent did not think this would be helpful. Just under three in ten (28 per cent) respondents said it would be neither helpful nor unhelpful.

Table 22: How helpful would you find information about Social Security Scotland in video format? (n=434)

	%
Very helpful	27
Helpful	31
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	28
Not so helpful	6
Not at all helpful	8
Total	100

What is helpful about video

We asked respondents why they thought information about Social Security Scotland in video format would be helpful. The most common response was that respondents felt information delivered in this way is easy to understand and remember, particularly when compared to written text. Many respondents expanded on this theme, explaining that they respond well to visual or oral information.

“Sometimes it is easier to absorb, and remember, information from a video rather than just reading it.”

“I am a visual learner and a picture can paint a thousand words.”

Some respondents said that they envisaged that information presented in video format would perhaps feel more 'personal' and 'human' than written text. These respondents felt that information presented this way would put applicants and clients at ease when applying and claiming.

"It would certainly help as I do believe it would show a human face to something which can be quite daunting."

"Hopefully would mean language used more service user friendly and less formal and bureaucratic."

Many respondents expressed that receiving some information about Social Security Scotland in video format may be less strenuous on their physical and mental health than written information. Others highlighted that information delivered this way may be beneficial for particular groups of people, for example, those with a learning disability or requiring other languages.

"Some people aren't good at taking in the written word especially if on strong medication or have certain medical conditions or in pain."

"It does not need a good reading ability, it can be replayed as often as needed and paused. To allow a person to process the information at their own speed."

As indicated above, many respondents also said information about Social Security Scotland in video format would be helpful because they would be able to watch and re-watch them at any time or place.

"This could be watched, stopped at something I found difficult, rewind and played again to help me understand. It can be watched several times to make sure I get it right."

Finally, some respondents said that any information provided about Social Security Scotland's benefits and services in addition to written guidance would be beneficial. A few felt this would result in more applicants' completing their application accurately.

"The more information claimants have about the process and how it works step by step could make them feel more confident in using the system."

"Sometimes videos can help people understand better and supply the correct information the first time."

Why video would not be helpful

We asked respondents why they thought information about Social Security Scotland in video format would not be helpful. Some respondents said that they personally found written communication easier to understand, faster to take in, or easier to refer back to.

“I find the written format easier/quicker to access rather than listening or watching someone explain. Also can refer back to the information or re-read if necessary whereas it is more long winded having to watch the whole thing again to find the relevant section.”

As above, a few respondents felt that video format may make it difficult to locate relevant information.

“People tend to look for information to be quick and videos can sometimes be drawn out and you don't know where the information that is relevant to you is contained within the video.”

“It's not so easy to go back through a video to find a particular piece of information.”

Some respondents felt that information in video format would not be helpful because they or others do not have technology to access the videos online, or felt that the technology needed could be unreliable.

“We live in a world of computers. However, a large proportion of people in need do not have access to anything to play a video on.”

“In case there's a technical fault with internet.”

Other respondents explained that information in video format would not be helpful to them due to their disability or health condition. In particular, some respondents described having difficulties concentrating and retaining information.

“It is alien to blind people like me.”

“My fatigue makes it too difficult, too hard to concentrate and take information in all at once.”

A few respondents felt that online information videos about the benefits and services delivered by Social Security Scotland would not be helpful because they held the potential to be 'patronising' and 'impersonal'. These participants feared

that such videos could present information which did not reflect their own direct experiences, or would fail to meet the needs of all applicants.

“Lack of understanding of the needs to the claimant, not everyone's need is covered by a single video.”

“Could be patronising in language or format. Hard to target to everyone.”

Others said that they would not find information presented in this format helpful because there would be no function to ask questions.

“A general video is not likely to cover the questions I would have.”

What information would be useful in videos

Finally, we asked respondents what information they would find useful in video format. The most popular options were videos explaining each benefit (78 per cent), explaining how assessments will work (77 per cent), and explaining how to apply (76 per cent). The least popular choice was a video explaining how clients can notify Social Security Scotland about a change of circumstances, though this was still chosen by around six in ten respondents (61 per cent).

Table 23: Which of the following information would you find useful in video format? (n=396)

	%
A video explaining each benefit e.g. eligibility criteria	78
A video explaining how a face to face assessment will work	77
A video explaining how to apply	76
A video explaining how Social Security Scotland will make a decision on applications	73
A video explaining the redetermination and appeals process	68
A video explaining how to notify Social Security Scotland about a change of circumstances	61
Other	14

Respondents who selected 'other' suggested the it would be helpful to have videos on:

- what the application questions are asking and an example of an appropriate answer
- how some benefits are linked to other benefits
- what reasonable adjustments are available
- who has access to personal medical information
- what happens at each stage of the application
- the ethos of Social Security Scotland

What's next?

The Scottish Government will continue to work with the Experience Panels in the development of Scotland's new social security system.

These findings will be used to inform and develop a wide range of areas and services across Social Security Scotland, including the following next steps:

Different ways to communicate with us

We are designing our services so that as many people as possible can access our services where and how they want.

This means we are giving people different ways to contact us for information and to make claims. This includes online, by telephone and post. When our local delivery service is available, clients will be able to ask for a face to face meeting. The findings in this report will help us make sure we have the right communication methods in place at the right time for clients.

Application forms

We will do user testing on application forms for each benefit that Social Security Scotland is responsible for so we make them as easy to understand as possible.

Use of information videos

We will undertake further research and user testing on the use of videos as another way of sharing information.

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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